

Eastern Clay

Fourteen Stories

by

LOUIS GRACIAS

Author of "WILD WINDS"

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TO MY COUNTRY

"If we were to look over the whole world to find out the country most richly endowed with all the wealth, power and beauty that nature can bestow—in some parts a very paradise on earth—I should point to India.

If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered over the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant—I should point out to India.

And if I were to ask myself from what literature, we here in Europe, we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw the corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human a life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life—again I should point to India."

(Max Muller)

TO
EMILY
AND OUR CHILDREN

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PREFACE

It was in December 1939 that I published "Wild Winds", a book of "attractive little stories written with so much skill and sincerity" in Srimati Sarojini Naidu's opinion, and in which the *Modern Review* (then edited by Ramananda Chatterjee) discovered the writer's potentialities for contributing something lasting to literature.

A copy of this book was sent in February 1940 to H. E. Bates, one of England's greatest living short-story writers, considered by many as the greatest. And though it can hardly be determined what young native Indian short-story writers Bates had in mind in his book "The Modern Short Story", or whether "Wild Winds" made any impression on him at all, I reproduce the extract below, as it is of interest to India generally :

"'The novel,' said Edward Garnett, 'can be anything according to the hands which use it'—a truth far more widely applicable to the short story. For the short story remains plastic, and continues to increase its plasticity, as long as human nature remains the infinitely plastic and variable thing it is. In the 'nineties Kipling was writing of India from a viewpoint that was so popular and so widely endorsed that it might well have seemed, to the Empire-drunken Britisher of the day, to give the only right and proper view; in 1940 young native Indian writers have something to say of their own country from a viewpoint so unsuspected, so unheard of, and so real that Kipling seems guilty of nothing but plain falsification...."

And again :

"As time goes on we shall see better whether Kipling's picture of India is right. For now, fifty years after Kipling's autocratic heyday (note that he seldom appeared in anthologies and that for years he approved no cheap edition of his works), the emancipated native writers of India are at last beginning

to speak of their own country. The voice which Kipling chose not to hear is now speaking for itself with a quality of realistic and poetic truth that will throw an interesting light on Kipling's tinsel and brass."

And what Bates writes, with such remarkable candour, must be viewed in the light of Kipling's still being regarded as one of England's great poets and writers.

Yet, the short story is one of the oldest literary forms of India. "The fables of ancient India, the earliest of which are to be found in the *Chandogya Upanishad* and which have exercised profound influence on other literatures of the world," say Dr. Mulk Raj Anand and Iqbal Singh, in their introduction to *Indian Short Stories*, "can, in a sense, be regarded as the prototype of short story as an art form." It is my implicit faith, therefore, that India, which could once lead the world in the short story, among many other things, will once again rise to her pristine pre eminence. And it is on this account that I wrote to Gandhiji on the 17th December, 44 days before he was brutally assassinated, as follows :

"... .. thanks to God and you, India has realised her dream and is once again restored to her ancient proud dignity and honour. With the wresting of these, India will now be able to stand square and tall in many a sphere, literature none the least..."

Eastern Clay, however, claims no such distinction. If this little book should but only succeed in imparting even a slight vision of the *clay* of which we are moulded, its purpose will have been more than achieved. For, as Romain Rolland says :

"If there is one place on the face of the earth where all the dreams of living men have found a home from the very earliest days when man began the dream of existence, it is India."

LOUIS GRACIAS.

Eastern Clay

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MY INDIAN MOON

The sight of Naseem has shifted the scene of life and wafted me back to the days of my glorious youth.

My *Indian Moon* is no longer the voluptuous beauty she once was. Nor is she free and frolicsome now: the human mind at twenty-nine has outgrown the human body.

At this sober and thoughtful age the deeds of my youth seem incredible and shocking. In this respect one man is not very much different from another, I suppose. Youth *will* be youth and contribute its own zest to life. Such, perhaps, is nature's inexorable law.

Time was when happiness could be found in a toy —when mother's repeated shouts, urging one to drink his milk first and then play, went sorely unheeded. But happiness may not be wooed always thus. Some day she transfers her domain to the live dolls who screw up their eyes and smile and burr, swaddling one in a delightfully-exciting dream which gives a relish of heaven and self-sufficiency to our little earth. The priceless toys of childhood then lie neglected in some ungrateful nook or garret, even as much as these later toys give place at length to restless ambition and insatiable greed.

So Naseem was all the rage of my youth. And to add to the rapture of my possession of her, she was the idol of the youth of my youth.

Her beauty is closeted amongst the treasures I have devoutly cherished. Yet how should I describe her? The beauty of woman is compact with the whole of nature's mysterious exquisiteness.

The Kashmiris, it is said, are the most beautiful people in the world. And Naseem was a Kashmiri, slight of body, stately in height, with the contours of the crescent moon. She had a small, oval face in which two enigmatic, mischievous eyes forever gleamed, from underneath dark, vanquishing eyebrows, irradiating the beauty-mole on her chin and the baby-dimples in her highboned cheeks. Her soft, silken hair, faultlessly parted in the middle, cascaded in a torrent of dark fascination behind her. Her dreamy, caressing voice afforded as many thrills as everyone of her warm, velvety, vivifying touches. And purple wine, rather than blood, seemed to course and quiver all through her alabaster being.

Then, there was the *kajal* (lamp-black) in her eyes; the *henna* on her long, tapering fingers; her *kurta* (shirt) and *dopatta* (scarf) that covetously sheltered her sloping shoulders and gracious bosom; and finally her loose, graceful, flaming, velvet *shelvar* (pyjamas).

Such is the picture which haunts me still. Age has not dimmed it nor robbed it of its freshness and wonder, though its subject, alas! has been somewhat borne down by the wear and tear of the passing years! Ah, what would not one give to arrest the devastating foot of time and grapple forever unto his soul the

woman that transformed his youth into an ecstatic and fiery dream !

Naseem was the daughter of an eminent and wealthy barrister. All the luxuries of life were hers. A string of servants danced attendance on her. A bottle-green *chevrolet* rolled its proud freightage to and from the Catholic convent where she was receiving her education, the first Kashmiri who ever sat on that convent bench. Whatever parental care and love could devise was lavished on this adorable child. No wonder, she was a trifle spoiled : she lived without check or restraint, in that lighter and broader atmosphere of which her talented and distinguished father had breathed deeply in the west.

But Naseem was not the only child. There was her brother Mirza, the heir-elect, some years older than Naseem and almost of my own age. Mirza, who was an actor then, is a famous film-star now. The bonds that bound our kindred souls in our youth have knitted closer with the gathering years.

When my father, luckily for my youth, moved over to Byculla where Naseem thrilled the earth, this magnificent creature had been decoyed by pneumonia to Srinigar. In becoming Mirza's friend, I was, therefore, hardly aware of the treasure that would soon be mine. We were new college-mates, but not once in the course of our six months' close association did Mirza make mention of his sister, the beautiful Naseem.

But the miracle happened one Sunday morning. Nature was then in her finest and freshest array, and the youthful sun sported up the virgin sky to the lilt of feathered harmonies. I was seated musing in my gallery on

the first floor, with the *Gitanjali* lying neglected on my lap : when Naseem suddenly walked into my garden, even as much as into my life. An angel, a fairy—that's what she seemed. As fresh as a dew-drop, as delightful as the mystic dawn !

Perking her lovely head at me, she smiled and then glanced around at the roses in my garden : luxuriant beds of pink, red and white ; roses small, large, very large—a nuptial profusion.

Often since have I known woman's magnetism, but never once the rapture that transported my entire being when my entranced eye first dwelt on Naseem. My heart instantly sounded the call. And in feverish response to it, I was already running down the stairs to render homage to grace and beauty.

When I stood before her, like some lost and distracted soul, she was still smiling. But her inscrutable eyes had curled in a strange wonder.

"Hallo ! Who are you ?" they seemed to say. "Surely we've not met before ? But we are going to be friends : aren't we ?"

And I stared dumbly at her, thrilled, enchanted—when suddenly she glanced at the roses once again and then slowly raised her eyes to mine.

"Mind if I take a few of your roses ?" she said. "David used to give them to me when he was staying here."

Mind ! Did I mind if *this* Indian moon, this epitome of grace and charm and loveliness, took a few of my

roses ! "Certainly not !" I said. "Take—do take as many as you please."

She thanked me, and forthwith fixed a pink rose in her hair, her hands framed as though she were almost set for an Oriental dance. The sensitive flower, I thought, blushed at Naseem's touch—Naseem who had just then denuded the beautiful valleys of Kashmir of their incredible glory.

She was picking the roses gently, ever so gently, as though they were something sacred, something too good to have or touch, when all on a sudden, like one possessed, I committed desecration on nature and pressed out of her the kindness which pulsed in her heaving breasts.

Naseem looked on, amazed. "Oh ! Oh, how very kind of you !" she said, at last. "But, really, I didn't want that many, you know ? You shouldn't have spoiled your garden for *my* sake."

"It's nothing," I said. "Nothing ! Flowers were made...for such as you."

She looked hesitantly into my eyes, buried in roses upto her chin : red, white and pink roses—roses, leaf and thorn. And then she left me. But it was only then that I discovered what else she had taken away with those roses. It was my heart : my poor heart, which has never come back to me since....

I related the adventure to Mirza at college, next morning, but my friend just smiled.

He had always smiled at everyone of my reports. They were good, oh yes, very good, but hardly acceptable

The truth had got so merged with the aerial, the fantastic, that it was no better than a thrilling lie.

"But, Mirza, I'm not imagining things," I said.

But he kept on smiling. And I promised to prove it to him. "She's sure to turn up again," I said. "Next Sunday, you come and see."

"But that was only Naseem," he said.

"*Only* ? Why, what can you be meaning, Mirza ?"

"Yes. Only Naseem, my sister."

I was shocked, pleasantly shocked. I was happy. I laughed.

"Mirza, did you say '*Only* Naseem' ?—just because she is your sister ?"

"I believe you emptied your whole garden into her hands," he said.

And I was troubled and disturbed. My pride had indeed prostrated itself before Naseem. Could it be that the girl had passed some uncharitable remark in the consciousness of her triumph over a human heart ?

What had she said to him ? I wondered. It had to be known. Mirza would have to tell me. He, my friend, would have to tell me everything that passed between them. And Mirza agreed. There was nothing much, but he would tell me. In his agreement half my fears were soon allayed.

"When she came home," he said, "she burst out into one of her dramatic laughs. 'Brother, see ! Just see what our new neighbour has done to me ! Would

you believe it ! He plucked the rose-trees by the very roots ; he demolished his fair garden on my account !... Brother, who is he ? 'He's my friend, Naseem,' I said. 'My best friend.' 'Oh !' she said. 'And he's a poet, the cleverest boy in our college.' She laughed. 'I see,' she said. 'There was such a drowsy look in his eyes. Meeting him for the first time, I almost believed we had known each other long, very long : he was so very courteous and attentive and concerned.' 'In a few days there'll be hardly any tree standing in that garden,' I said. 'Goodness me !' she said. 'How very different from David he is ? It might have been David or the gardener for all you care.... Still, I don't fancy poets. They are too soft and tender : they are not men !'

So the girl was by no means proud and cruel, as indeed she might have been.

"My father and her own beauty have undone her utterly," said Mirza, after a moment. "She's a spoiled child, my sister. Why, who could ever understand a heart which falls in love in fits and starts : and with boys, too, she can never hope to marry !"

It was a casual remark, prompted by brotherly solicitude—by no means intended for me. Nevertheless it was a reality that had to be faced.

Yet that which we can never hope to have is what attracts us most. A woman, who cannot be ours to love and cherish for life, must be ours if but for a fleeting moment only. And that temporary gain of her must have its full measure of possession. At such desolate and despairing moments one is drawn into acts both ridiculous and unsocial. If this can be said of man

generally, why may not it be said of blind and precipitate youth ?

Constant visits to Mirza's house soon established that wished-for familiarity between Naseem and me. But this familiarity had bold streaks of a mischievous reserve and indifference. For, Naseem was like the yellow sand you hold hard in your hands and find slipping through your fingers. So I resolved upon outwitting her. "Look here, fellow !" my heart seemed to say. "This will not do ! We must find means to encompass this tormenting elusiveness."

And the means were found. It was in the Victoria Gardens, one evening. Strolling along a walk, I espied Naseem seated in one of the arbours deeply engrossed in a book. 'Action ! Action, sir !' I told myself. And putting on the stoutest of hearts, letting consequences go hang, I tip-toed to Naseem and, blindfolding her with my hands, I kissed her till she almost lost her breath. *I don't fancy poets ! Poets are not men ! H'm !*

She sprang up like a ravaged fury. "How dare you ? You...!" But she soon detected who it was, and happily enough smiled.

My triumph amazed me.

"I had never hoped you would be so bold," she said, scanning me curiously, as though I was not myself, as though she had met me for the first time. "I had an impression you were all made of curds !"

I was still trembling with emotion. "Won't you sit down ?" she said.

We then both sat down, close to each other on the cold green lawn, our legs stretched out languidly. Then, not knowing how to break the silence, I asked her what she was reading.

A love story, she said. It was the finest she had ever read. "I was always fond of love stories, you know. Even as a child I loved those fairy tales best that had love and gallantry in them."

I laughed. "I'm glad two kindred souls have met," I said. "For I, too, have always loved the things you love, Naseem!"

There was a provoking look in her deep, brown eyes. "You must be a dangerous person then!" she said.

I laughed again. "And so must you!" I said, putting my arm round her and giving her a kiss.

She then looked at the book in her lap. "What a man!" she said. "He's my ideal: every woman's! Strong, devil-may-care! One who, when his heart's set on a thing, gets it for all there is in the big wide world! One who, when he has found his love, will hold her in his iron clasp dare who may to come between!"

"Naseem?" I said, suddenly springing to my feet, drawn up fully before her.

"Yes?"

"Are you blind, my Indian moon?"

"Why?"

I looked resolutely into her wondering eyes. "Dearest ! can't you see ? Somebody has just walked out of that book. Your ideal is now before you—in the very flesh. You've no more to go hunting for him in story books, my moon !"

God only knows what happened to her then ! Hurriedly clasping her arms about my neck, she smothered my face with soft, tremulous kisses.

We shared each other's company a long, long while, that evening. The lengthening shadows had already merged into one violet darkness, but we were still seated together, talking of the strangest things that struck our youthful fancy and fervour. We were the last people to leave the zoo.

Need I confess that this evening was the fateful precursor to untold evenings of passion and mirth ? And need I relate all our subsequent escapades, our moments of rapture and ecstasy ? Must I even tell you that we eloped one day, for as long as a whole week, till the police finally disturbed our dream, and restored to our homes from a milk-man's hut in Bassein the *Shah-Zada* (Prince) of one place and the *Shah-Zadi* (Princess) of another ?...

Casting back my memory across the flight of the years, I can see the breath-taking hours I have rushed through with this idol of my youth. I can still see the reputation we staked for each other—even our lives on two exclusive occasions !

Yet, considering what Naseem was, I wonder which of us similarly placed would have emerged from it all unsmitten and ungalled !

Even in the calmness and gravity of age, I am not quite resolved whether I could bring myself to exterminate this chapter from the book of life. For I loved her, I loved my Indian moon, and would have held *her*, and *her* only, for all time !

The sight of Naseem snatched back those happy days again. Looking at her, I even wondered whether manhood was not a dream. But, alas ! the ten-year-old Zubeida, tripping gracefully by her mother's side, brought home the illusion : the beautiful, impish Zubeida who has pushed back my generation and Naseem's !

THE BLUSHING ROSE

On my last visit to Goa after well-nigh seven years, I called at the 'Tendulkars'. The notary and my father were great friends, and our two house-holds had for a long time been inseparably knit.

A soft, tremulous voice, silvery-sweet, was crooning a *dakhni* (folk-song) as I knocked at the open door. And I was sure it was Sudha : the Tendulkars' long-awaited and only child, whom I had once kissed and caressed and danced on my knees.

But instead of the girl I had known, who do you imagine glided to the door ? An exquisitely delightful creature, whom nature had newly proclaimed a *woman* with the tenderest and daintiest of her touches !

Indeed she thrilled my soul even as the exhilarating Spring. But she amazed me and overwhelmed me as well. And I wondered why, when a voice within me swiftly answered :

"Seven years ago, sir, you could never have conceived the miracle of the blushing rose !"

Sudha did not recognise me. Yet her knitted brow and wondering sidelong glance revealed that I was no stranger.

"Father and mother are at the Adikharis," she said, smiling. "It's Anil's *thread ceremony*, you know. But it's already two hours, do come in please...they should be back any time now."

She then led me into her house on lithe, dancing feet.

As I entered the familiar little parlour, I detected at a glance the changes it had undergone in my absence. The old, mahogany furniture had been discarded. While the art pictures and family portraits, except for the garlanded image of Shri Krishna, had shifted their positions. The unceilinged roof, too, had now the flat red tiles imported from Mangalore. And what was once a cow-dunged floor was now one shining sweep of broken china—diverse, multi-coloured, kaleidoscopic figures.

But all these changes apart, what indeed struck my eye from the very outset, on my spontaneously looking in that direction, was the absence of Sudha's life-sized baby portrait which had hung prominently on the wall facing the main door. An allusion to this, I decided, would certainly be an interesting way of drawing my charming hostess into a recognition of her guest.

Straightaway, therefore, when Sudha had taken her seat in a chair directly opposite to mine, I fixed my gaze on the bereaved wall for quite a while. Then, slowly and deliberately, I glanced all round and chuckled regretfully.

"T'ch, t'ch. What on earth have they done with her!" I said. "Sudha is a lovely woman *now*. But where's the imp of mischief I once knew?"

She did not speak. She only looked long and steadily into my face with large wonder in her big, bright, smiling eyes.

She was still struggling with her memory, when I added :

"Sudha, little one, now that you are all set to go to father-in-law's, don't tell me you've discarded your friends like your old clothes."

There was tense silence for a moment. Then, suddenly, the little room was transported with the reckless abandon of liquid mirth.

Holding her face in her dainty hands and shivering with laughter, Sudha exclaimed :

"Good lord, it's Avinash ! But how was I to know ? It's ages since I saw you, Avi...oh how you've changed !"

"Yes, Sudha," I said. "Yes, I've changed—changed a great deal, I'm afraid ! But God will not let a man remain young always ; nor strong either. I could not surely carry you on my shoulders to-day as in the days gone by...no, not even if you brought the roof down with your devilish screaming. For you, too, have changed, Sudha. God has performed His supreme miracle in you. It's so with every girl who becomes a woman, and it's good for man that it is so."

But there was no seriousness in that radiant face. All through she gazed at me dreamily, and then laughed aimlessly.

And I told myself :

"It cannot but be so. If you'll have Sudha fresh and tender and nimble, you cannot also have her serious and sober and thoughtful. Some day, no doubt, she'll be

sedate and grave, but then it shall no more be Spring. The lamb, that frisks and capers on the rugged cliffs drunk with the sheer joy of existence and thrilled to the magic of its effulgent youth, will then dully graze on some low-lying pasture, tired and worn and bored. Life will have lost its warmth and zest, and joy itself will have grown old and wearied, changed beyond all recognition. Yes, Spring will then have gone—gone forever !”

Springing to her feet with the quick energy of youthful effervescence, Sudha suddenly cried out :

“Avi, I’ll get you some *paan*.”

And forthwith she danced away with the same old *dakhni* in her kindly voice, the swish-swish-swish of the liquid folds of her pink georgette *saree* joining in the general harmony.

“How tall and stately she is !” I thought, as she tripped gracefully away flooding my soul with an inexplicable joy. “Could it be, Sudha had gone through some mysterious process ? Had she been put on some unconscious rack and drawn into the ideal inches ? Placed in an ethereal mould and pressed into the felicitous curves and contours that abide on grace and loveliness ?...”

My reverie, however, was soon cut short, for she flashed back into my sight again with a silver box on a silver platter.

Gliding towards me across the dining-room she snatched a side-glance in the large oval mirror hanging on the wall, and as she tossed her streaming hair into position with a shrewd and lightning gesture of her head

and shoulders, there was a flutter in her delightfully-lifted bodice.

And I realised how good it was to be young ! How good to feel the sap of life pulsing and dancing through every fibre and tissue of one's being !

She painted the leaf with lime and catechu, strewed it over with betel-nut, cardamom and ptyshotis, and rolling it into a cone she offered it to me. She then made such another for herself.

How enchanting was Sudha's finesse in this gesture of hospitality ! Even her red glass bangles could not keep silent over their admiration of the supple movement of her rounded limbs and burst forth into tinkling praise. And lulled in the lap of this blissful atmosphere—the soul-enrapturing sight of Sudha, the grace and wonder with which she took the very heart of the betel captive, and finally the cordiality with which she offered it to me—is it at all strange if I wished that life were an eternal banquet of *paan* !

When she had thus shown her goodwill to her guest, Sudha set the tray aside and seemed to be at peace with her genuine soul.

“Avi,” she said, drawing her chair close to mine. “Now tell me about yourself—everything !”

I do not know whether it was my life that thrilled her. Or whether it was just her soul quivering to the dawn of womanhood. But I can still hear the echo of her wild running laughter. I can still see the multiplicity of ingenious poses her smooth, elastic figure wriggled through as she hearkened to my tale. Yes, I can even see the bewitching golden-wheat and coral that raged

a deadly war in her dimpled cheeks, and the glamorous lights that scintillated in her soft, trustful eyes.

And here, suddenly, Sudha had a visitor. The fellow crept languidly towards her, chanting a plaintive ditty as he moved along.

"Oh Sham ! Sham !" Sudha greeted him in a voice pent up with the tenderest emotion. With wide-open arms going half way to receive him, holding him, she finally strained him to her heaving bosom, crying : "Sham ! oh you darling, you !"

And witnessing this affectionate scene. Sudha's affection for her overfed lazy Persian kitten, I could not help wondering how blessed would be the man on whom Sudha's all-encompassing love, her soul-stirring kisses and caresses would soon be bestowed.

I was with Sudha for almost two hours, but the Tendulkars had not returned. And as my stay in Goa was very short and I had little time at my disposal, I informed my young hostess that I was leaving. But she would not countenance my departure. And in order to allow my soul a few more exquisite moments, rather than accommodate Sudha, I tarried another hour in her company.

I need not tell you why, at parting, I held her hand so long in mine ; why, after bidding her farewell over and over again, I lingered for yet one more word with her, yet another last look at her.

Her vision still clings to me in all its glory. Indeed, I would have it forever so !

NEW LEAF

It was a Saturday afternoon, and the little *Big Ben* on her three-mirrored dressing-table teased and vexed her continually. Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick : one o'clock, two, three, four, five....

Patience cannot be pricked into action forever.

She had tried to sleep, but all she had done was toss feverishly in bed. She had tried to read, but her mind was frightfully stiff and crammed with a world of unaccommodating thoughts. Several times she had gazed at her pretty figure in the mirror and was even annoyed with herself.

At last, she walked across to the window and looked out into the street.

People were already stirring out. "Why shouldn't they?" she asked herself, half-audibly. It was madness to shut yourself up in a world which had so much to offer !

Some were young married women who leaned proudly and jealously on their husbands' arms. Some, tender lovers moving jauntily along with beaming and expectant faces.

A few of them looked up and smiled. "Hallo, Susie !" "Good afternoon, Susie !" "How are you, Susie ?"

There was hardly anything in these greetings, but she felt that she was being deliberately pitied and mocked. And she ground her teeth as she muttered to herself :

"You think me a fool ! Just wait and see, you good-for-nothings !"

Some eight to ten minutes she stood there at the window. From the movement of her eyes it was evident that a battle was raging in her soul, and that she was being dragged and drawn this way and that by irreconcilable forces.

But the grim issue seemed to have been resolved at last, for she suddenly rushed to her walnut wardrobe and snatched out her pink afternoon frock, her red plastic hand-bag, her new *Bata* shoes, and a thing or two besides.

She then looked for the rouge and lipstick, and not finding them she almost turned her wardrobe and dressing-table upside down.

All her life she had hated these vain accessories to beauty, but her humourous cousin Jack had presented her with a set of these on her last birthday. And they were lying unused—where, she could not exactly remember. Yet she had seen them often enough.

Giving up the search in a fit of despair, she commenced dressing. Ah ! what a relief it was, really, that she had not to do up her hair ! She had always taken good care of it, and curled it on pins every night. Though modest, she had always been artistic in her looks and general appearance.

While powdering herself, however, she suddenly gave a short cry of delight, flung the powder-puff onto the table, and flew into her bath. There, in the medicine-chest—good heavens, what a memory!—were the rouge and lipstick. And in a few moments her pouting lips were as red and luscious as the pomegranate, and there was the tender flush of innocence in her smooth, ivory-coloured cheeks.

Her toilet completed, she gazed at her dainty little figure in the mirrors from diverse angles, patted softly an unruly curl, powdered her chin and neck once again, bolted all her windows and doors, and finally slamming her yale-locked door behind her she stepped out into the street.

Her tight pink frock, which eschewed her knees and cast a delightful glow on her pretty oval face, lent her the appearance of a girl of sixteen, discounting five nauseous years from her life. There was a lure in her simple step and gait, and all about her hovered a rustic charm—the irresistable charm of freshness and purity.

Soon, she was walking along *Chowringhee* where men are wont to haunt the pavement with mysterious looks. And she suddenly grew nervous and fearful. She was even prompted to return home. But noticing the flutter she had raised and highly flattered with herself, she quickly turned bold and reckless once again.

That both young and old men leered at her was no surprise. In a city there are human wolves prowling for human flesh both night and day.

And woman that she was she pretended to pay no heed to them.

But you cannot evade a rake. No, not when he is rich, and surely not when, above all, he is young and tall and handsome.

The well-fed wolf jumped off his *desoto* and followed her patiently. Her rebuffs, he knew only too well what they were, after all !

"Come on, don't make a fuss," he said, at last.

She had glanced at him furtively all along. Now, suddenly, she looked straight into his face and smiled. Here on the footpath, near *Chowringhee Square*, the people were not so thick and she was able to muster the necessary courage.

"Alright, I'll come to the pictures with you," she said.

"Fine !" he said. "That's fine !"

It was somewhat late, but a few "rear-stall" seats were still available at the Metro....

It took some prologue for his hand to plump onto hers—he fumbling, she pushing it away ; but it plumped all the same, and as it would seem forever.

At "interval" they scanned each other curiously and smiled. The bearer just then came round, and he offered her some chocolate. She had always loved chocolate and she thrust her hand mechanically forward. Then a sudden pallor came over her face and she shook her head resolutely. No, it wasn't good to be indebted too much to a stranger, she told herself.

But he insisted. "Come on," he said, throwing two large Cadburys in her lap. And she somehow acquiesced.

But he would not eat the chocolate himself. "There's something much sweeter," he said. "It's the finest thing in the world."

"What ?" she said.

"Woman !" he said. "*You*."

"I ?" She looked at him as though it was a strange compliment, something she had never heard and was therefore hard to believe. "I ?..."

"Yes, you," he said. "You're the sweetest girl I have ever met !"

"Nonsense !" she said. "You don't know what you're saying.... What's the picture ?"

"*Blossoms in the Dust*," he said. "You won't regret it."

"Regret ! Me ? Why, I hardly see the pictures !"

"How strange !"

"You're telling me !" she said.

During the picture he put his arm round her, caressed her, and passed his fingers through her soft, wavy hair. And she felt as if she were dreaming. Nobody had ever paid her such attentions before.

"You know ?" he said, rubbing his cheek against hers. "You've just *her* eyes : those beautiful eyes of Greer Garson !"

"I'm beginning to believe I have everything," she said, laughing....

The picture gave over at a quarter to nine. She thanked him, and said she must be going home, it was getting late.

He laughed. "Imagine you thinking of leaving, when our evening's just begun! You're coming to the *Grand* with me for dinner. What use is it otherwise?"

Never having been to the *Grand* she could not resist the temptation. "Very well," she sighed. "But it musn't be more than an hour, mind."

The dinner was expensive and delicious. In fact, she was glad of her indiscretion.

And there was a sense of abandon and gaiety all round. So that she even drank wine, though with a feeling of horror and dread at first. Why she drank the second and third glasses, she hardly knew. Everyone was drinking and he had kept on asking her all the time.

And she was happy. "Why not?" she thought. Wasn't she enjoying life? And wasn't life to be enjoyed?

And she was proud and elated. What woman wouldn't be? Was it for nothing that the men rooted their gaze on her face and figure? And whatfor were the women stealing hungry glances at *her* man?

When she opened her bag for her handkerchief, something dropped to the floor. He instantly picked it up.

It was a photograph. He eyed it critically and then looked at her, surprised. "You're not married, are you?" he said.

She snatched the *snap* from him. "That's my uncle, silly—my mother's brother," she said. "Oh, how ridiculous you men are!"

He laughed. "I was only joking," he said. "What, indeed, would a cherub like you be doing with such an old jackass!"

And she laughed, laughed wildly.

Dinner over, he took her arm. "Come, let's dance at the — Garden," he said.

She was feeling dizzy, but she consented nevertheless. She could not dance very well though, she told him. She hadn't danced for four whole years.

However, she soon got into her stride. They danced first a fox-trot, then a quick-step, then a waltz, and finally another fox-trot. After this they were both tired and they both said so in one voice. But he would not let her sit down. His demeanour now was very vague and strange.

"Come," he said, and he led her to the reception office of the hotel.

She was still not quite herself. But she saw him thrust two notes into the clerk's half-open hand and, after some delay, sign a book.

Then an hotel boy conducted them to the third floor, and she followed wondering where she was being

taken. But when the boy halted at Room No. 116, flung open the door and quickly disappeared, she got frightened and straightaway made for the stairs.

"Don't be a fool!" he shouted, running after her. "This is where I stay. Come and see the place."

He then squeezed her shoulders, strained her to his bosom and gave her a savage kiss. And what with the wine's treacherous warmth and what with her desperate impatience with her own destiny, she felt as weak and helpless as a little child....

It struck midnight when they came down to the porch. She looked troubled, and petulantly turned down his half-hearted offer to escort her home.

A sense of consternation came over her as she breathlessly retraced her steps homeward. But on inserting the key hesitantly into the yale lock and switching on the light, she heaved a sigh of intense relief.

Swiftly replacing her things she sank wearily into bed. Then her mind slowly recast the evening's incidents with a guilty delight, and she found it difficult to believe that she had at last kicked at her remorseless fate.

Some twenty minutes after, there was a click in the lock again. A man entered, staggering and knocking his knees at everything. Tumbling into bed by her side, just as he was, he tried to kiss her, but she pushed him away.

He then spluttered: "Sue! Sue, I'm sorry...for disappointing you... this afternoon. Yes, Sue, you've been...miserable...all along. But I'll turn...a new leaf.. tomorrow. Sue, I swear to you...a new...leaf...."

THE MISSING RIB

"Hey Lavinia, Margarita, Rosinha ! Hey beauties ! Have you no eyes in your heads, eh ? Just look, you butterflies, who's here : it's Pedro, as fresh and hardy as was any man on God's good earth. Ha, ha, ha !"

And the three peasant girls, Lavinia, Margarita and Rosinha, who were returning home from Sunday mass with veiled heads and beaming faces, looked shrewdly over their shoulders and crying out in chorus : "God give you good day, grandfather," moved slowly away with childish laughter in their voices.

And old Domingo, called *grandfather* by the village folk, shuffled about with extreme satisfaction and shouted back to them in his reedy voice : "God bless you little ones, give you, too, good day all the days of your life !"

But Pedro only blushed. Turning his gaze away from the young women, he slunk into a corner of the old man's balcony.

"Bah !" said grandfather, shaking his beard-hidden face at him. "Look at you ! Just look at you ! Bah !"

Pedro smiled a half-sickly smile. "Grandfather, Pascu's come back to God," he then suddenly remarked. "He's heard mass after fifteen years, to-day."

"May the Lord be praised!" said the old man. "Yet who can tell? Pascu might have been eating hot coals some day, if his little Anna, the angel, hadn't rapped that hard on the Virgin's heart. The drops of joy and gratitude that coursed down her dimpled cheeks were a sight, yes, even to me who have let the world go by eight and eighty years!... But, Pedro, noticed you *Padre* Eustachio's face and carriage at mass? No? He prayed with the fervour and rapture of a saint. So that I told myself: 'Domingo, it's true you haven't seen St. Francis, but just look at our good old *Vigar* * now!'"

Some obtrusive thought then cast its search-light on the long, long ago: on what was and might still have been. And grandfather turned suddenly sad.

His companion laughed. "Hey grandfather, what irks you, eh?" he said. "Is it all the trees you've lopped down for the new city? Why, Margao is surely something to boast of now! So our sailors say, and they've seen the world!"

The old man shook his head, slowly and decisively, looking at Pedro as though he had much, very much, to learn. "One's livelihood is often a regret, son," he said. "But it's not my hewing down of creation, nor even your tracking for pasture for your herd when the earth's barren and dry, one really grieves over so much. There are greater things, things common to *batcara* † and beggar, woodcutter and cowherd: they are common to all men!"

*Vicar †Landlord

Pedro's eyes gleamed mischievously. "I'm only a cowherd, grandfather," he said, "and old Vishnu's razor has yet to cross my chin, but I can point out your ailment — like that!" And he flicked his fingers merrily. "Tell me, hasn't some skirt sent your old head reeling round and round? Bachelors were ever dangerous, women say: but they have yet to reckon with an old one like you. Ha, ha, ha!"

The woodcutter also laughed, he laughed loud and long. The thoughts of youth, how delightful, how funny they were!

A voice then suddenly keeps clamouring in the distance, a shrill sing-song voice. "Who wants fish, folks? Who wants fish, who wants fish?" Tarrying awhile, it skids along, tarries and then skids along: "Who wants fish, folks, who wants fish? Mackerel one a pice, and prawn a handful for three." And some moments later, Kothrin, the fishwoman, scurries past the old man's balcony.

"Kothrin! Hey Kothrin!" Pedro shouts out to her. "Throw away your stinking fish, you miserable widow, and take a man!"

And Kothrin, who has not quite heard him, shouts back that mackerel are one a pice and prawn a handful for three.

"It's not those scaly, slimy things we want, you silly," he cries out to her through funnelled hands. "It's *you* Kothrin, you! Grandfather, here, is willing and if you are too, you needn't smell like the dead

any more. Kothrin, come say the word, and then clap a bargain before God's altar, you pretty!"

And Kothrin looks mightily abused, and glowers at him with her thick, matted eyebrows. "Ach! you scoundrel!" she grinds her half-eaten teeth at him. "You b-beast!..." Then wafting her hand impatiently, she flies away, piercing the air once more with her shrill call:

"Who wants fish, folks, who wants fish? Mackerel one a pice, and prawn a handful for three."

Grandfather, who had kept silent all along, chuckled. "Hai, hai, how men will judge everything after their own fashion!" he said. "The young man spots honey only on a woman's lips and finds the rest of God's world bankrupt, eh Pedro?"

"But tell me, grandfather," says the cowherd, as though he were just reminded of it. "Woman, is she really our better half? Or does she exist, like the devils, merely to tempt us men?"

The old man almost choked with laughter. "Ha, ha! Ha-ha! Ha-ha! How funny you little people are! Just because you feel warm in a woman's presence and find your heart going pit-a-pat, must you class her among the devils, eh? That's how she was made, you ninny: and who was God's mother any way?"

"True, grandfather—but it's so hard to reconcile!"

"Those feelings you mean? Why, there's nothing wrong in them! And take it from me, son: so long

a man hasn't his missing rib—remember Eve?—so long will he remain restless and incomplete; and vain and fruitless will be his hunt for happiness! Alas, such is God's ordinance! Ah, if only things were otherwise! if only she had..."

"If only she had *what*? grandfather!" asked Pedro softly, gazing into the old man's sad eyes.

Domingo looked dumbly at Pedro. "But that's the end of the tale, son," he said after a while. "If you'll hear me it were better I had told you all."

Pedro nodded eagerly. Resting his elbow on his knee, with his chin in his hand, he fixed his sympathetic eye on the old man and waited.

And grandfather, after scratching his beard several times, cleared his throat and entered on his narrative.

"I was only twenty-four then: strong, muscular, intrepid and carefree. No better woodcutter there was, no sturdier man in all the country. So the *batcaras* sent for me from everywhere; they even paid me a double wage, saying: 'Take it, Domingo, take it!' They thought I didn't know I was a saving still, the generous devils! — the poor hardly know their worth!

"*Senhor* Alvares had just then returned to Chin-chinim, after fifteen years, with a vast sum of money. He had got a lottery, some said; others, that he had made it on a ship — God only knows! You have heard of him."

"A little," said Pedro. "They say he showered silver rupees on the *Kunbi** girls very much in the fashion of the broken rice we throw to our chickens."

"Yes, he did a lot of shocking things. But he had also grown mighty proud. Lowly in origin himself, he looked down on his people: 'Illiterate and vulgar skunks,' he called them. But that's not all. He disowned even his parents — Lord, what a curse!... And with his huge wealth he hypnotised the village, bought up two-thirds of Chinchinim, wilderness and marsh, paddy-fields and cocoanut trees, alike.... What wonder, if he chose to live apart, far away towards the north? It was a dense strip of ground, a little wood, which the axe alone could handle. So I was sent for, ten of us — but one of my fellow-workers was old Saluzinho, a native of Chinchinim. May God rest his soul!"

"And this Saluzinho had a daughter, eh grandfather?" winked Pedro, sliding into his youthful humour once again.

The woodcutter smiled. "Nowadays they sniff at things in the very shell," he said. "But it's the old, old tale, any way: the tale of the missing rib!"

He paused. His look was now curiously blank. "You know, Pedro?" he said some moments after, as though he were living it all over again, as though he were just the twenty-four-year-old Domingo, the sturdiest woodcutter in all the country. "It happened in Church, the morning after I had arrived in

*Aboriginal

Chinchinim. I had not met Saluzinho and his daughter then. It was a Sunday. All through holy mass I glanced at Angela and the Virgin in turn. And the more I gazed at the Virgin, the more I looked at Angela! Pedro, the holy Mother spoke to me with her kindly eyes. Do you know what she said? 'Hey Domingo,' she said. 'See, there kneels your missing rib!'

The cowherd blinked, as though he were beginning to understand. "That explains the pull between man and woman," he said. "It's that rib that does the trick, I see!"

"Well, there were as many as ninety girls in Church, for a young man's heart to go afluttering and awandering. But I swear to you the moment I espied Angela, even before the Mother of God confirmed the truth, I knew I had come upon my missing rib. There was such a tug at my breast, Pedro!"

"Grandfather, it must have been your finest rib, eh?" said Pedro, rolling his tongue.

"As every woman is, son. Pascoal, as you know, married Jacquina: an uglier girl one has yet to see. But their love for each other is nevertheless as staunch and ardent as that of the martyrs!"

"Grandfather, but what was your Angela like?"

"Angela? Why, a simple girl, fresh and vigorous, with a sweet smiling face, and eyes as clear and warm as innocence. She wore no flowers in her hair, she prinked not about. Just a plain skirt and blouse,

glass ear-rings and glass bangles, dark hair carefully parted in the middle and coiled up in a snaky knot at the nape: and she was a woman still, I tell you! When she sang the *mando**, she was sweeter than the bulbul in spring! She sang with feeling, she sang with her whole heart! And we felt proud of her and of what she sang: we felt there was nothing finer than Goa and the Goans! Yes, son, she was a sweet and adorable woman, with the heart of an angel—quivering to every joy and sorrow with equal measure, be it her's or another's! No wonder, everyone trusted Angela, sought consolation from her maganimous soul!"

"But what happened to her?—I mean, you two?" said Pedro. Then suddenly he commenced laughing. "Hey, don't tell me your missing rib mistook itself for another man's?"

But grandfather did not heed him. "At noon, after the Angelus, on the very first day, Saluzinho asks me to share his meal with him," he said. "There am I, squatted under that cashew tree, eating the food that Angela has cooked and has herself brought for her father. She's a grown-up girl, almost seventeen, but nothing will make her look into my eyes—no, nothing in the world! All she does is blush and smile, smile and blush, looking sideways as she offers me everything, *everything*! And what a meal it is! Fried mackerel, pickled mackerel, *miscoot*† and rice—and prawn curry, one of those Goan curries which makes the mouth drip with the very thought!"

*National dance †Curried mango-pickle

The cowherd smacked his lips. "Our brothers in Africa and Bombay simply die for our curry," said he. "Try as they may, they just can't make it there. God gave us the best water in the world, grandfather, what?"

"Yes, we Goans are indeed a blessed people. It's not water alone He gave us; we have the gifts of faith and music, and a world of things besides! There are no better Catholics in the world: every home offers a son to God! And as for music, our boys play the violin untaught, like the birds in the air!"

And here he stopped. He was trying to recollect where he had left off.

"You know, Pedro?" he now said. "For as long as a whole week Angela only stole glances at me. Then getting accustomed to me, liking me, she gradually turned her big, childish eyes full on mine: we became friends. And good old Saluzinho watched us with a happy, contented face.

"One day, some three months after, he was trying to get at something in his simple way. 'Hai, hai, Domingo!' he sighed dismally. 'If only I had married young! My neighbour's house, as you see, is full: seven sons and four daughters, and laughter and joy and strength and hope! And *why* not? Francisco refused to let life slip through his fingers, he stepped to the altar when it was crowded with blessings!'

"And one evening Saluzinho gave a *Ladin** at the wayside Cross. Our pedagogue, Caetan, was there

*Litany

with his church choir. *Feni** was served, in cocoanut shells, and water-pickle too. And Saluzinho was more than drunk with happiness and *feni*. 'Hey, *mestre* Caetan!' he cried, tugging at the pedagogue's sleeve. 'Drink man, drink! I saw the Virgin Mother and her angels prick their ears at your wonderful violin. But they also nodded to me—to *me*, ha-ha-ha! Know why they were nodding? They were saying I would have my wish; that I would have *my* wish, *mestre* Caetan, hi, hi, hi!' And the potbellied, bald pedagogue, in whose able and rigid hands lay the culture and character of the village, gobbled down the *feni* like a young turkeycock. Then smacking his lips with a savage gusto, he suddenly fixed his eye on me, and nodding several times burst into a loud laughter of understanding and approval."

Drawing a small, cloth bag from underneath his gold girdle, which suspended his large, red, loin kerchief, grandfather picked out a tobacco stem.

"I say, Pedro, would you believe it?" he said, chewing the tobacco. "It was Domingo who was doing all the blushing and turning away *now*! Angela was so much in love with me, that she would do nothing but look into my eyes, tenderly and enquiringly. She had become as perky and bold as a garden sparrow which gradually picks the crumbs from your very hand. She sang the *mando* as though Domingo were the one theme ever sung. And every little thing she said, as she screwed up her fond eyes, was indirectly intended for me, and *me* alone!

*A Goan liquor distilled from cocoanut toddy.

"Yet, if anybody hinted to her about me, this daughter of Eve would curl her rosy lip and say: 'H'm, that big hulk! What an idea! That man would crush me in his big, hard hand, or pull me to pieces like a child does a flower!' And again: 'I marry him? Goodness me! as if all living things were dead and buried!'"

He paused. Then a big tear slowly coursed down his furrowed cheek and was lost in his dense, white beard.

Pedro walked up to him. "Hey grandfather! Hey, hey!" said he, shaking him gently by the shoulder. "Hey, you're no better than a child! Misfortune comes to us, it's for our good — don't you know?"

The woodcutter looked up at Pedro and sighed. "Yes, son, yes!" he said. "From then on, the clouds gathered over my life. *That* bad man spoiled our sweet and simple dream! He set a light to our hope, and it instantly crackled and went up in smoke. For, what, alas, was our hope, but a wisp of hay?"

And Pedro spat out across the balcony bench. "May the dog never rest!" he said.

"*Senhor* Alvares had spoiled every poor girl in the village: but he could never seduce my Angela! She had glowered and ground her teeth at everyone of his approaches. His gold and jewels she had flung back in his ugly, bloated face. 'Ach, you devil!' she had screamed at him. 'That very trash betrayed the

Saviour once ! Get away. Get away, or I'll kill you !' But that pig kept on. His overfed palate still rolled and dripped at the sight and image of Angela : Angela, fresh and vigorous and pure, and gay as a lark that does nothing but sing !

"So one morning, when he could suffer it no more, he stole across to Saluzinho's hut and straight-away laid his stinking hands on her innocent breasts and polluted her clean, little mouth. And Angela, who was frying fish at the time, scratched his face all over like a wild cat, she almost strangled him. Then rushing to where we were, with her half-open bosom heaving like a troubled ocean and her eyes as sharp as a knife, she reported the outrage to her father. But Saluzinho said not a word. Quietly and patiently he listened to his daughter, and then suddenly, without giving a thought to what he was doing, he marched to the *senhor's* house with his axe on his shoulder, and hurling to the ground the three men who tried to prevent him, he severed the devil's head from his shoulders !

"The father and daughter were immediately arrested. Then there followed a trial : the usual farce where the poor can never prove their innocence ! It was a long, long affair. Innumerable witnesses were called, I was one of them. But the rich lawyers plied us with so many clever and hurried questions, that it was simply beyond us, ignorant people ! All we could do was to look foolish and contradict ourselves.... But, Pedro, what made us all suddenly feel we were dreaming, was what the police *cabo** told

*Corporal

the judge ! And the dog was as serious as a child at prayer ! He confessed that four thousand rupees and a box of jewellery were unearthed in Saluzinho's hut. Good heavens ! when the man could hardly afford his tobacco ! So, Saluzinho and Angela were sentenced for life, and soon after deported to Mozambique."

The old man's shoulders twitched violently, and there was silence again.

"Forgive me, grandfather, but what became of them ?" asked Pedro. It was a slow and reluctant question, almost whispered.

"Old Menino, who returned years ago after serving his sentence there, said that they were no more. They died of the sleeping sickness, barely three years after their arrival."

And though Pedro did not ask it, the old man looked into his eager, expectant eyes, and added :

"Many, many things he told me, son. He said that, though Angela had turned skin and bone, she crooned the *mando* as of old ; that she still smiled like the fairest and sweetest of God's daughters ! 'Hey, she asked me to tell you not to grieve,' he said. 'In all that she did she stood for you, she said. Tell him, everything, she said, for that big hulk is as tender and soft and bashful as a little girl !' "

Pedro's eyes suddenly kindled. "Grandfather," he said, "this is the *very* Angela whom the preacher cites as a model to our girls and women !"

The old man smiled gaily, scratching his head and wondering how he could have ever forgotten it. Something in Pedro's words had inspired him, something bright and comforting.

"Tchah! God's Mother will never forgive me for this!" said he. "Do you know, Pedro? In Church, I still keep on looking into the Virgin's face. Hey, can you guess what she says? 'Domingo,' she says, 'some ribs were not meant to be restored to their owners. Your's, for instance. Among such ribs are *Santa* Teresa, *Santa* Rita, *Santa* Philomena, Maria Magdalena.... Are you sorry, son, that they were espoused to God?' And I gaze, incredulously, into the Holy Mother's eyes, and smile. I smile and smile, so that the congregation thinks I'm mad—stark mad! I smile and tell her: 'Mother Mary, you must be joking,' I say. 'But, if it's true that my Angela is amongst the saints, why, Domingo can surely wait! But when the earth's no more and I'm in Heaven too, God will no longer need her, will He? The rib is mine, after all!' And the Holy Mother smiles, Pedro; I swear to you she smiles—sweeter than ever!"

“MY BEST GIRL”

Only a simple little widow takes her meals in the dining-room of that cottage at Chapel Road in Bandra, but the table is always laid for two; it is only she, again, who sleeps in the south-west room facing the sea, but the bed in the opposite corner is forever made: for there is no knowing when *he* may come, when *her* son, her *Alec* may come!

She is sixty-three years old, and hobbles rather than walks. Yet at the faintest knock, she instantly pricks her ears and rushes with youthful vigour to the door to hug unto her mother's breast, at last, the treasure she has long yearned to be ushered into her arms.

Five years is a long, long time! You can understand a son not writing to his mother for one month, six months, one year, say even two—but certainly not five! Nothing like this ever happened in the world!... No, her son's letters were definitely mislaid. There were no numbers on the houses of that suburban town of Bombay, and what was worse there was a constant change of postmen. They did not know her name. How could they? Nobody ever wrote to her, and her Alec was all she had in the big, wide world ever since the long-forgotten day of her widowhood.

When a horse's hooves clattered down the road or a motor-car sounded its horn, she would grow

terribly restless and impatient. "Agatha! Agatha!" she would call out to her old maid. "Just give a look, will you." And Agatha would go daily some fifty times half way on to the road, and return to the kitchen silent and grave.

Every day she bought the *Times of India* with renewed eagerness and hope. Surely the paper would report about him. Her Alec was no ordinary man. A physician who goes to Berlin for his Doctorate of Medicine is *no* ordinary man. And on her going through all the pages, indiscriminately, column after column and word for word, with wide inescapable eyes, for the merest trace of his name, it would rest upon Agatha, who also knew how to read and write a little, to do the same; and after Agatha, it devolved on those who chanced to call. Day after day, year after year, she sought for consolation in this dense wilderness of print...

At the slightest mention of the presence of a sailor in the neighbourhood her heart would beat faster and faster, and there could be no rest or sleep till she had seen him. Agatha, who was entrusted with the charge of conducting the sea-farer home, would invariably catechise him on the way.

It did not matter whether his vessel plied only from Bombay to the Persian Gulf, or Bombay to Colombo, the simple little widow would ask him about her son. Sure the sailor must know about him for her Alec too had gone over the seas. And he would tell her, just as Agatha had instructed him: that her son was well, that he had become a great doctor,

and, finally, that he would be coming home soon. And hearing this oft-repeated and never-changing news about her son, she would be all aflutter with joy, move restlessly in her chair, then beaming with a thousand smiles she would suddenly leap to her feet and strain the sailor to her heaving bosom : this messenger of happy tidings who had come from over the seas where her Alec was....

All through the day she would gaze at her son's picture and smile, as her heart retold the unforgettable tale. An imp of mischief, that's what he was. Stubborn as a mule, but with a heart of gold. How often didn't his father engage her in a love-quarrel with the remark : "Matty, that boy is hundred per cent you. We Noronhas have had nothing in him, you understand?" Yet when the child was born, the rogue had claimed otherwise : "Everyone says he's like his father. Matty, don't tell me you were asleep!" Those were days of gladness and rejoicing, and life was good and worth living a thousand years.

One day, when Alec was only six, she had struck him unintentionally on the nose for stealing jam, and he had said : "Mum, you just wait till I grow big and strong!" She could not help shedding a tear whenever she recollected how indiscreet she had been. Yet what did her Alec actually do when he had grown big and strong? He had only held her in his big broad arms and mingling his tears with hers, said : "Mum, don't worry, I'm here. We *had* to lose dad some day!"

It was a long, long 'ale, the happiest in the world, that she kept repeating daily to herself. No king could have felt his power extend, no merchant have witnessed his money increase, with as great a satisfaction or happiness as when she watched her Alec grow from an infant into a man. Nor could their hopes or triumphs or fears ever equal hers....

The venerable Father Rodrigues, grown wise and tender in the service of the Lord, paid her his weekly visit. And every week she told him the self-same tale. "You know, your reverence? One evening, some months after he had done his L., M. & S., my Alec came to me, very serious like. 'Mum, I've a confession to make,' he said. I could not help laughing, your reverence: I had never seen him so serious before. 'Alec!' I said, I was still laughing. 'A mother's heart will forgive anything—but don't tell me it's murder, my son!' He suddenly looked sad and guilty. 'No, mum,' he said, 'no, it's not murder; but the news will certainly kill you.' I grew so nervous, Father Rodrigues. 'Yes mum,' he said, 'for it isn't good for a son to tell his mother that he's in love.' I laughed. So it was only that. And I pinched his nose. 'Oh, you rascal!' I said. 'I'm in love with my best girl, mum,' he said. 'Terribly, madly in love. For me she's the only girl in the world, and I couldn't have had a better if I lived a million years! Would you imagine, mum? She's so very concerned about the least thing I do, the least thing that happens to me. If I triumph, she triumphs also. If I'm sad, she too is sad, very sad. My fears and hopes are hers, my happiness is

hers. In a word, we belong to each other, body and soul: we are part and parcel of each other!... Mum, is it right to fall in love with such a girl? Oh, what simplicity! 'Why, surely, Alec!' I said. 'At your age love is only but proper, my son. But to be loved so is indeed a blessing!' He seemed glad, your reverence: glad that his love had had his mother's approval. 'Come on, guess who it is, mum,' he said. 'Violet?' I ventured, off-hand. No, it wasn't Violet. He shook his head. 'Beauty alone is only a worry,' he said. 'An useless thing.' I thought of Laura, with whom he had been for many a dance. 'Laura?' I said. He looked as though I couldn't have blundered worse. 'What!' he said. 'Don't you know that, though she's learned and rich, she's frightfully proud? No, mum, none of your Lauras and Violets for me!' I then thought of the girl I had always had in mind for my Alec. 'It's surely Jane then,' I said. 'For she's good and kind, and wise and lovely: my own choice for you, Alec.' But he shook his head and laughed. He laughed loud and long. And I was disappointed. 'No? Alec! Then it must be someone I don't know,' I said. He laughed again. 'But that's exactly where you're wrong, mum,' he said. 'You know her very well, mum—in fact very much more than I myself know you. Come on, mum, be a sport. Try once again—for the last time.' So I covered my face with my hands, and tried hard, very hard, to recollect. But there was hardly anyone I could think of, your reverence. And I was just on the point of telling

wasn't I stark mad ! And didn't I quite suffocate him with my kisses ! 'Oh, mum, you silly !' he chuckled, at last, rubbing his nose against mine, his cheeks wet with my tears. 'Did it take you *that* long to know that *you* are my best girl ? And that you'll *always* be my best girl ? Dearest, who could be simpler and sweeter than you !' And cradled in his manly arms, Father Rodrigues, my happiness could find no speech. there was such a lump in my throat ! Oh, what a son ! Why tell you ? You knew him so well, your reverence.' "

But this simple little widow caught a chill one day. The doctor percussed her, he used his stethoscope, he percussed her again. He then shook his head. "Double-pneumonia," he sighed. "A hopeless case—for an old woman !"

Yet, ill as she was, she still struggled to get out of bed on hearing a knock at the door ; still made Agatha go through the daily paper, and walk across to the road to see if any *victoria* or motor-car held the welcome freightage ; and when, finally, before yielding her soul to God, rallying considerably, she recognised Father Rodrigues, her face took on a beatific expression, as she mumbled to him for the last time : " 'Mum, *you* are my best girl,' he said. 'You'll *always* be my best...' "

And with this one thought, the crown as it were of her life, this simple woman, this mother—the eternal mother of man—took her leave of the world !

Then people started talking. The women, particularly, who regarded it as their own concern. "He must have married a German girl and settled down in Berlin!" "Boys were always ungrateful!" "Why will a great son own a simple mother

Agatha, who still took care of the cottage, wept bitterly at the censure. But these slanderous tongues became more and more uncharitable as the days passed. "The Noronhas were ever heartless! Didn't the shameless Eva forsake her husband and four little ones, and elope with a *tommy*?" "Wasn't a Noronha convicted of robbing and oppressing the poor some fifty years ago? What wonder then if a Noronha killed his own mother!" Agatha hardly ate or slept. There was a haunted look in her eyes.

So, one day, when she could bear it no longer, she rushed to the old parish priest.

"Tchah! Agatha!" said Father Rodrigues, looking at her emaciated figure and wild eyes. "You mustn't take on so."

"Yes, your reverence," she muttered, frightened and oppressed. "But people..."

"Why worry about them? People will talk even when there's nothing to talk about, don't you know?"

"But..."

"But what? you ridiculous woman!"

"Your reverence, three months...after the master... left..." she stuttered nervously, gazing timidly into the priest's eyes.

"Yes, Agatha, yes?"

"There was a letter, your reverence. But the mistress was away, and...loving the master as I did, I instantly... opened it...."

The old man laughed heartily. "So, there *was* a letter, after all! But you forgot to give it to the mistress, eh?"

"I'm not lying, your reverence. There was a letter. But it wasn't from the master. It was about him. It said that he ... had died ... of heart failure ... a week after he had arrived in Germany."

"And you expect me to believe this, Agatha?" He eyed her cunningly. "Ah! what won't women do for love and loyalty!"

"But it's true, your reverence! If you doubt me..." she said, and putting her hand into her bosom, she pulled out a long folded envelope and handed it over to him.

He read the letter hurriedly and was stunned. He could not believe his eyes. Nor did he know what to say to her.

And the old maid, thinking that the priest was angry, hastened to explain:

"It's all my fault, your reverence ... but the news would surely have killed the mother too!"

THE VERDICT

It happened at Kanke in Ranchi, a little after three in the afternoon, on the 23rd of May. I was the guest of Dr. Ajit Bannerjee, the psychiatrist, who is attached to the Asylum there.

Outside Ajit's little red-brick bungalow is a banyan tree which spreads its thick, tangled arms far and wide. Seated in its cool shade, on a large iron bench, I was reading my friend's *Bhagavad Gita*.

What a book! How strange is its influence on the human soul! I was reading it slowly, ever so slowly : when suddenly I descried something grey and thin and short flying towards me across the long avenue of tamarind, mango and banyan trees leading from the asylum.

Soon the object in grey turned out to be a woman. Speeding like one pursued, she came and flopped into the bench, by my side, breathless and fierce and terribly unconcerned.

She was pressed against me. Her lungs sounded and moved like a bellows. And large yellow beads of perspiration stood out tremblingly on her long neck with its far too prominent adam's-apple.

I moved a little away. And instantly she glared at me with hatred and resentment.

"You shrink from me," she said, bending her face almost to her knees and mopping the sweat with the edge of her asylum gown. "I'm a plague, a viper—that's what I am!"

I made a gesture of explanation but she cut me short.

"No, no!" she said. She was shaking her head imperiously. "You're afraid of me, everybody is. No. Why make excuses for another's misfortune!"

I did not speak. At any rate she was not prepared to allow me to do so.

"See!" she said, clutching at her hair, in the manner of one enacting a scene. "Your hair's like a ghost's! And there's horror in your restless eye!" She almost dug her twirling finger into her eyes. "Why, you are mad—mad, I tell you! The judge pronounced it in court, didn't he? What better *verdict* could you have had!"

I looked nervously into her intimidating eyes, and at her pale, menacing hands. How had she escaped from the asylum, I wondered. And how had she ever got there: this intelligent woman with her still young and attractive face!

"This gash *here*!" she said, forcing her blouse down her left breast, with a twisted mouth. "This might have been the grand exit: the door to peace and oblivion! Curse the soul that damned my plan! One can't live if one wants to; nor die, either. Bah! a fig for the rotten world, and Him that made it, and them that mar it still!"

"Policemen, warders, chains, closed walls ! I tell you my Jack can never witness this sorry turn. His Heaven must be Hell !"

And slowly she looked away from mè. She was lost in an oppressive silence.

Then suddenly her eyes turned gentle and plaintive. And her voice softened considerably. It was a strikingly tender, subdued voice, begging for sympathy and understanding.

"Ten years now, and see what things have done !" she said. "You wouldn't believe I'm only twenty-nine, would you ? I was born on the seventeenth of October, 1915." And then she flashed back into suspicion and resentment again. "But you'll not believe," she almost shouted. "You are doubting Thomasses, the whole pack of you. You'll not recognise truth when you see it..."

"Come closer," she bade me, after a moment, opening a heart-shaped locket which hung from a gold chain in her neck. "See, isn't the date inscribed there ? My god-mother gave it to me when I was born. You couldn't spot the like of her in the whole stretch of the universe ! Not even if you bribed women to goodness and virtue !"

And she sank into silence once more.

Then, some moments later, she tapped me lightly and caressingly on the shoulder. "I'm a nuisance, I know," she said. "But listen, won't you ? Something heavy and urgent keeps ramming from

within. And I feel relieved, see? All I want one is to listen—just listen.... Believe me, I'm glad I've met you. You are kind and trustful. I can see it in your eyes.

"But listen! Deep down here, I've a wound that hurts, terribly. It's a big red sore that grows with the days and years. Heal it will never for all the pretensions of time. Hence my desperation

"Life has nothing in store for me : my world's empty, stark empty! And my pain, my sorrow, my loss—ah, my loss! I tell you, friend, some of us were better dead than alive!

"You fall in love; you sacrifice all you have, all you are, for your near and dear ones. Why?—only to see them mercilessly snatched away! Yes, only that your despair might be called madness!"

She paused. Then slowly there was a distant, endearing, almost ecstatic look in her light brown eyes.

" 'Peggie!' how often wouldn't he exclaim?" she said. "Clasping me in his big broad arms and peering into my eyes with the fervour of his whole being. How often, indeed! 'Peggie! some day I'll make it up to you, angel!' he would say. 'You're doing all the giving now, but I'll make it up to you. This poor clerk, for whom you've forsaken home, comforts, riches, learning, society—the world: he'll give it back to you Peggie, sure he will. And lord, don't I already see how you'll take it, darling! All a-mad! All

a-lost ! 'My *man* has made it after all ! Come on, Jack, let's split a bottle of *Tennent's* over the catafalque of grief and want ! I knew it : I knew my Jack !'

" 'Peggie,' he once shouted at me. 'Peggie, even love has its damned limits ! I'll not have it, I'll not have you reduce yourself to dust for my sake ! I cannot stand it, do you hear ? Engage a servant *right now* !' Ha, ha, ha !

"And the day I whispered to him the joyous news ! Can I ever forget it ? My Jack was all aflutter and radiant, like a child with a new toy. 'Peggie ? Peggie ?' he kept on asking. 'Peggie, are you sure ? What, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, Peggie ? Your love and mine one, at last ?' "

And instantly her face writhed with pain. It seemed as though her soul had been suddenly drawn into the whirlpool of an exquisite grief.

"But it was not to be," she said, with clenched fists. "My happiness was not to be ! God envied me. He would not let my Jack live.... When the doctor pronounced the fatal hour. I held my beloved in a grip of iron. I tore my hair ; I smote my breast ; I screamed : 'Darling ! Jack ! Jack ! Darling ! Don't leave me ! Dearest, take me with you !... Lord ! Good Jesus ! Kind and gentle Lord, help, help a forlorn child !' But it was not to be !... Before dying, Jack regained consciousness, looked tenderly and steadfastly into my eyes, shed a tear, and then smiled. 'Peggie !' he muttered. "Peggie, dearest of

God's good women : you're not alone ! Peggie, you are not alone ! You have our child. Sure he'll be a boy. And he, Peggie, will redeem his father's pledge. Your son and mine, beloved, will still make it up to you, darling !...'

She paused again, limp and overwhelmed.

Then, it must have been after some five minutes, her eyes kindled once more. They were alive with a new joy, almost incredible.

"Four months after, my Georgie was born," she said. "Four months which seemed an eternity. Oh ! wasn't he a child any woman would be proud of ! The replica of his darling father. The same old trick of mischief in his caressing eye ! The same old tender smile shivering on his thin nether lip !... My Jack was now restored to me. My life was bright again, bright with the fire of a new-born hope.

"I took a telephone operator's job when my Georgie was seven months old. I would keep him with my aunt Eliza. But, ah, how I missed my little darling ! The eight working hours were like a dateless exile, a nightmare crammed with nameless fears and cares !... Whoever glanced at the clock so often. I wonder ! But it would end at last ! Never coming, never never coming, five o'clock would come at last ! And sighing, like one reprieved from doom, I would rush to my Georgie, breathless and frantic. I would clasp him in my feverish arms, hard, very hard, till our two hearts beat like one ! I would devour him with my eyes, feed on his lips, torture

him with frenzied caresses, ask him a million questions And then I would swear that we should never part again, swear day after day, trying to deceive my foolish heart !

“And so my son grew to three years of age. Three years, and we laughed together, cried together, hoped and rejoiced together, even discussed our affairs together. ‘Eighteen years more, Peggie,’ I would now tell myself. ‘Eighteen years more, old girl, and your Georgie will be a man ! *Think* of it, your son will be a man ! Eighteen years more, and you are *made*, Peggie !’ Ha, ha, ha !...”

Then her face grew suddenly dark and rigid. “But this *too* was not to be !” she said. And anger and hatred and grief and despair shot up in her eyes. “God had yet to deal His final blow,” she cried, trembling. “And mighty hard He dealt it. He sent meningitis to decoy my son ! My prayers and vows were of no avail. ‘I’ll give Thee anything, everything, Lord, but leave me not desolate in my lone widowhood ! Mary, dear Mother, pity, do pity a mother’s heart !’ But, it was not to be, *not* to be !”

And she brought her elbows down on the back of the iron bench with such force, such desperation, that she groaned with pain. It was this pain, perhaps, that forced the tears into her eyes.

For ten minutes she sat there, weeping and whining. It was a dismal cry. Then, suddenly, she seized me by the arm, startled. “See !” she said.

"See!" Her terrified eyes motioned me towards the curve in the avenue. "See, they are in for my blood again!"

It was an Asylum warder, middle-aged, large and ruddy. He came and placed his hand gently on her shoulder. Then looking affectionately into her eyes, he shook his head at her, in reproof. "Oh, what a girl! What a girl you are, Peggie!" he said.

He was leading her away, when he stopped short as though he had forgotten something. "She's the toughest of our inmates, sir," he said, turning round and staring into my tearful eyes. "You would never believe me, I suppose—no, not even if I swore to you that she came here straight from college, barely eighteen! No doctor has ever diagnosed her case. All I figure out is that her mind is more diseased than a poet's!"

I could almost have believed I was dreaming. But the woman just then screamed. "That's what you've been telling me all these years, you selfish dog! I'll bite your dirty lips off if you ever kiss me again — ever suggest marriage to me again!"

In a flash she was clinging to his neck, her feet dangling in the air, she struggling fiercely to get at his mouth with her chattering teeth.

And I heard the man beseeching her as he carried her away, bundled in his great arms. "For God's sake, Peggie," he was saying. "I beg of you, for God's sake, don't create a scene; or it will

certainly cost me my job ! You promised to be in the yard, that's why I let you out of the cell. And see where you are : like a free citizen of the world ! Peggie, good girl, for God's—"

LOST HERITAGE

(A story retold to a Goan exile by a foreigner)

It happened long ago, long, long ago, sir—when we, Goans, were good and simple, and God smiled at us from His throne in the stars.

I play the violin and can read and write a little ; and am dressed, as you see, like a gentleman. Why, I even earn a good hundred and over on a ship. But am I happy and content ? Alack, sir, no ! Yet the Lord Himself could witness that my people were happy and content....

It happened exactly two hundred and thirty-nine years ago, sir, and it lies far back and low down in the dark, heavily-piled lumber-room of time. No writer has ever cared to commit this simple tale to paper. And if it's still so fresh and vivid, it's only because the incident's so very scrupulously handed over from father to son, like a sacred heirloom....

You see that hill there, on whose broad shoulder that fiery cloud now rests ? And the river playing about its foot ? There, yes there, on the farther bank of the cool, clear, dancing waters dwelt my people—some nine hundred of them, in little huts made of cocoanut bark and matted fronds. There were one hundred and seventy-six huts all told. And these nine-hundred peasants lived like one happy

family, loving God and dreading evil, as though it were the cobra or the smallpox.

But the story, did you say? Yes, oh yes!—

It was a Sunday. A day of abstinence from labour and consecrated to the Lord. Yet Nicolau, our young peasant, was not at home. When a man is married, sir, and toils all through the week from dawn to dusk, Sunday is *Sunday*, indeed. Ask any wife and she will tell you.

Teresa, Nicolau's buxom and pretty mate, was like all her kind. Ah! how cross and restless she was! The man had left when the grass was still wet with the morning dew. And, now, the mango trees were already casting their reverse shadows, and goodness me! he had not even had his rice and curry! Truly, a woman needs a world of patience with a man, and it's good for the world that God foresaw it!

Still our Teresa knew where the rascal was. Most women smell their husbands' movements as it were. And Teresa had sniffed at Nicolau alright, even across a stretch of two miles.

But where on earth was he? Where else, sir—but in the village pub, his massive body stretched out on an old wooden bench!... Yes, drink is a strong and bitter foe, and denied it you would have never, no, not if you had witnessed our iron-fisted, gigantic peasant pinned down on his back by a bottle of *feni**: a feat which it would have cost as many as five strong, stalwart men to accomplish!

*A Goan liquor distilled from cocoanut-toddy

You see, sir, it was only a question of putting things to their proper use : I mean, the use for which the good God intended them. What harm is there, really, in swilling a *cals** or two after bath, before the evening meal ? It stimulates the appetite like pickle : it's better than any tonic. And I could tell you a thing besides : a dram of *feni*, after a whole day's sweat and toil, is something our honest peasants looked forward to, quite in the way of a happy deserving....

But Lucifer set the ball of mischief rolling in Heaven itself under God's own nose. No wonder, he fell head over heels in love with my people. I tell you, sir, the simplest way to make a man a drunkard is to promise the fool happiness low down in the receding depths of a bottle's fat belly. And it's this very thing that a legion of Lucifer's entourage hummed so very kindly into our peasant's ear. Six months, and our dauntless Nicolau was still probing for this liquid bliss !...

Let a man wash down his throat a bottle of *feni*, *cals* after *cals* in a fervent succession, from nine to eleven in the morning, and he will understand why our peasant was sleeping the sleep of the oppressed. But four hours' sleep will soothe anything. And the wily old, skinny, bony tavern-keeper, who was also a free physician to his clients, judged his cue. He moved up to Nicolau with an earthen bowl of cold water. "Nicolau ! Nicolau !" shouted he into the peasant's ear, looking around at his other clients in manifestation of his undoubted solicitude as he

*Wine-Glass

did so. "Wake up, wake up man!" But Nicolau, who was snorting like a whole stable of horses, only grunted and turned onto his side. Whereupon the apt physician grew suddenly grave and thoughtful. And then, in a flash, like one with unusual presence of mind, whipping his skeleton of a hand into the bowl, he splashed the water cruelly into the peasant's bloated face. The sleeper instantly sat bolt upright, and shook his head as though he had dreamt a frightful dream. Rubbing his bloodshot eyes with the back of his hand, he looked vacantly at the tavern-keeper. But the physician only guffawed. "Hey, you're alright!" he said, patting him heartily. "Why, it was only a bottle: a drop of milk for a big hulk like you! Ha, ha, ha!"

The peasant grinned distressfully. Then suddenly seizing the bowl from the tavern-keeper he stepped out of the tavern, bathed his face and head at the foot of a cocoanut tree, and finally gulped down the remaining water.

All through the tavern-keeper kept watching him from the door. At last, he laughed. "Nicolau, you're as sober as the man who's content with *nis**!" he said, taking hold of the peasant's broad shoulders as he returned. But loathe to be reminded of his shame, thrusting the empty bowl into the man's hand, Nicolau instantly addressed his step homeward.

But he had hardly taken a dozen paces when he spun round on his heel. "Hey!" he shouted. "Hey you! That still leaves me six bottles out of

*Conjee water.

those gold bangles. Don't tell me another tale tomorrow, or I'll bash..." "Alright!. Alright, Christian soul," laughed back the sly old rogue. "Six! Yes six, indeed, but by no means seven, you had better mind !..."

How horrible is guilt, sir, on a lonely country path, with your soul buzzing like a steamship within you! You might sooner dry away a teasing fly.

Time and again St Francis would rise before his mind. "What's come upon you, Nicolau?" asked he—the saint who was content that his body, untouched by the ravages of death, should remain in Goa, Nicolau's own country, a place of pilgrimage to to the world!

And clinging desperately to the saint's faded cassock was Teresa. How grieved and forlorn she looked! And what a crushing entreaty there was in her sad weeping eyes! Nicolau gazed at her, incredulously: as though it were not she, no, not Teresa, his dear wife! No more was there any gold in her hands. Her neck too was bare. And all that she wore were a tattered skirt and blouse. Sure the woman was weary of life: just eager to rest in the bosom of the Lord!...

When there's a storm in the soul, sir, everything delightful becomes a mockery and only adds to the existing darkness and pain. Nothing's, otherwise, quite so exquisite as a walk along the country-side. Just try it, sir, when your heart is clean and you are at peace with God and man.

And if you don't catch a glimpse of Heaven, may the devil take my soul!...

Nature was swooning in the ecstasy of her own beatitude. The bright and ardent sun tumbled down like a carefree peasant boy. Whilst the river, which had caught his spirit, danced merrily onwards to the rythm of her refreshing purity. And the countryside played a tune infinite in variations where all things joined in : the drowsy cowboy with his bamboo flute, the wood-pecker and the red-crested bulbul ; the drunken-eyed cuckoo, the perky sparrow and the philandering cock ; the conceited mongrel and the intimidating frog ; even the palms and the paddy-fields, with their pianissimo airs of shivering delight. And a world of things besides, including the crow and the cricket, the magpie, the martin and the lark—and the butterfly, as though it were conducting it all, with its fluttering suspenses, its sudden sweeps, its rises and falls....

Do you know why the frogs croak, sir ? They form the base in nature's forever unfinished symphony. And who plays the drum in this huge orchestra, who the trumpet and the clarionet, who the fiddle, who what—I'll leave you to discover for yourself. There are thrills and triumphs in the pursuit of such knowledge, I can assure you....

However, all these joys only sharpened Nicolau's guilt and added to his torture. It even seemed to him that creation was deliberately proclaiming his sin in the proud consciousness of her own virtue. And he sped away like one possessed, his shadow

stirring panic in many a bush and tree as he flew past.

At last he came in sight of his home. It lay behind two large hay-ricks, in the heart of a dense mango-grove. Close beside it gurgled the little river, with the cocoanut trees which flanked its banks reflected in the water. And behind it, as far as the eye could see, stretched the paddy-fields, an immense, undulating, yellow carpet.

Nicolau slackened his pace considerably as he approached his little hut. He even kicked aside his old and faithful dog, Largo, who came scampering to receive him....

On the line outside was drying his *kabai* (tunic), which he had seen Teresa wash that morning. The cow-dunged floor, in front of the hut, was neat and tidy as usual; it had been given its weekly layer by Teresa the day before. He saw these things and paled. How could he confront the good and gentle Teresa: how look into her reproachful and anguished face! Fearful and reluctant, he halted outside the door with averted eyes. Then, suddenly, making the sign of the Cross, he took a deep breath and walked resolutely in.

Good heavens! sir, but what did he instantly discover? I tell you, seeing is like being stone-blind on not seeing what one wants to see. With fixed eyes stretched at their widest, poor Nicolau looked for his wife, looked for her like a lost needle. He shouted himself hoarse calling for her on every side.

But, alas ! she was gone—she had disappeared. And Nicolau's heart grew heavy within him. And darkness shot up before his eyes : dense darkness, like a wall many foot deep....

The absence of one's wife, I know, is no cause for alarm. But I myself shouldn't have felt a whit better—no, not if Teresa had repeatedly told me that she could suffer it no more : that she was tired of life and some day she might have to escape from it by drowning or hanging !...

On the floor lay the last token of the kindness and vigilance of a loving and dutiful wife. Nicolau stared wildly at the *vatti* (brass plate) and the covered earthen pots containing the rice and curry and boiled pumpkin.

Also spread out circle-wise, exactly the way it had slipped down her feet, was Teresa's home skirt. In his father's large, old, wooden box, Nicolau remembered, along with his faded, blue serge coat were Teresa's festive garments. And he rushed to the box with one last hope, flung it open, and rummaged savagely for those garments. But alas ! they too were missing. And no wonder, sir, if you have heard tell of women suicides !

He then turned frantic and flew to the nearest well, looking up at the trees as he scurried past. From one well he rushed to another and then to another, till he had looked into all the wells and up at all the trees in his little village. Nay, he even looked into the chuckling waters of the shallow river. But Teresa was not to be found.

At last, breathless and sore in foot and muscle, the poor man dropped down by the river-side, under a cashew tree which was in full blossom, and with his head buried in his hands he struggled to forget his terrible misfortune.

A long, long while he remained thus. The weary sun had already sunk as low down as the youngest jackfruit tree. Then luckily a cow nearby mooed loudly, as it grazed on the green pasture, and startled him out of his stupor.

What was he to do? Where could he go? Of whom might he seek assistance now? Then suddenly a thought struck him. It was like a glow in the darkness. And he forthwith stretched his limbs, took a deep breath and moved steadily onwards. "Father Abraham! That's it—father Abraham!" a voice kept calling within him, beating time with his fast and forceful step...

Fifteen minutes, and he was facing a large hut. It lay in the very heart of the village. And wasn't our peasant confused and frightened, sir? Not that there was any cause for it, oh no! Why, before father Abraham even our lunatics and the possessed turned instantly calm and sober. Yet Nicolau shuffled from one foot to another and would not venture forward. You will wonder why, sir. Even so do we. But the reason our fathers offer in the way of an explanation is that it was the tribute that guilt pays to virtue....

But charity rears all men to a level. Our holy man, who was seated on his doorstep, somehow

espied Nicolau and hastened to receive him with wide open arms. "Bless my soul if isn't the son of the upright Domingo!" cried he joyously, clasping him and drawing him to his hut. "How are you, eh? Alright? And how's Teresa, your dear wife and guardian angel?"

Nicolau said not a word. And the old man shook him encouragingly by the shoulder. "Anything... is there anything I can do for you, eh?" said he. "Come, come son, don't tell me you're here only to enquire whether father Abraham's growing impatient of being kept away from the mansions of the Lord. Ha, ha, ha!" And the soft carefree laughter pervaded all things with its rare virtue. Yes, it was no other than our best and holiest peasant, sir, whose name is a house-hold word with us still.

And Nicolau smiled forcibly. The secret that dangled on his scarcely moving lips refused to be cast away. Ah, and this in the very presence of *Welcme*, too! I wonder whether you've ever seen her, sir. I haven't, really. Step-sisters and cousins has she many, and I've met them often enough. But in father Abraham, our elders tell us, this handmaiden of God had chosen her abode. And Nicolau must certainly have been distraught, if he couldn't glimpse at her tender, smiling visage peering ecstatically out of father Abraham's small half-open eyes, and irradiating his mellow, bearded face with the ardour of her magnanimity and sublime being! Certainly beside himself, I say, if he failed to detect her gentle soul throbbing in every fibre of that venerable old man !...

It's not for nothing that a man grows old, sir. It's not for nothing that one lives to a hundred and five. Only imagine what would happen to the world, with youth in one scale forever in the disposition to kick it to the beam! No, we cannot dispense with age: for the clasps of the Book of Life will only yield to the pressure of the mounting years....

The old man fixed his troubled gaze on Nicolau and sighed. "Hey, you're afflicted," he said. "It's certainly not what God bestows on His friends—but an affliction of the soul. Tchah, tchah, how often hasn't the preacher warned us, son? How often must you be told that the wages of sin is death?... Man's safety and happiness lie in righteousness alone. And if the fiend tells you another story, what else do you expect? What else?—do you for a moment believe that he could ever mistake Hell for Heaven?"

And Nicolau was suddenly touched to the depths of his being. He wept like a child and sobbed out his story in the midst of his tears. "What shall I do, father Abraham?" cried he. "I need her! I need my wife! I need my Terezina!..."

Father Abraham burst into a merry laugh. "Ha-ha-ha! So you'll have her, eh? Well, have her by all means then. Only tempt not the Lord again. A pretty wife for a *corso** of poison? Bah, what an exchange!"

"But where's she, father Abraham?" he suddenly enquired. The old man screwed up his eyes. "How should I know? It's only in Heaven that the eye traverses the earth from pole to pole, don't you know?" And then he rubbed his wrinkled cheek against Nicolau's and winked gaily. "Strange mates God gave us, eh Nicolau? Who leave us in a passion and hide in holes to cool their outraged temper?... But see! Just see, son, the hot earth has already cooled—why shouldn't a lump of pretty flesh also?...Nicolau, she'll come back to you, sound and alive, sure she will—or I'll exchange places with my great-grandson, that roguish toddler there. Ha, ha, ha!"

And the glow, which had erstwhile suffused Nicolau's face and then swiftly vanished, burned brightly in its sphere again, like the sun which temporarily wilts in the embraces of a foul cloud. For, Nicolau knew as much as any member of our peasant community how sound was the judgment of that man of God.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go on, get home. It's she who must be weeping now." And the hand, that was raised in benediction, was suddenly seized and covered with wild kisses of dumb gratitude.

"Man sees God's folly enough in a woman's tongue. It yaps and yaps till it almost drops out of her stinking mouth, we say. But nobody ever thinks of that wisdom which has placed an immeasurable distance between that waspish, yet very necessary, tongue and her patient and ever-relenting heart!"

How rare and wonderful, indeed, is *Hospitality*, sir? She receives you with wide open arms and refuses to let you leave. And when you *do* leave at last, you carry away the feeling that she is with you always, present or absent. And this is what Nicolau exactly felt after that great soul had accompanied him some fifty yards with his arm clasped affectionately round him.

But the aged peasant suddenly turned back. "Hey! Hey Nicolau!" he called out. "One word more, my lad." And Nicolau hurriedly retraced his steps. "Son, can you guess *when* an old man still has the use of his limbs, his organs and grinders, his sight and his hearing? No? Then I'd better tell you. It's when his youth has taken care of his age. Leave it to the fool, son, to rush through his young days at the speed of a lifetime..."

How soft and easy is the foot, sir, when one's heart is light! Nicolau now marched homewards to a new beat which his heart was joyously thumping away. Our deep-breathed girls, just then, were *ioh-ioh*-ing to the pigs, calling those ill-fated wanderers home. And the cart-men *ah-rah-rah*-ed, *ah-rah-rah-rah*-ed at the bullocks with such emphasis, digging their whips furiously into the animals' groins, that it certainly looked sinful to be out after dark.

And what a clamour the crows and sparrows raised? Nicolau thought that they were just egging him on. Oh, how man, under a given circumstance, will draw meaning and sympathy from everything he sees, hears and feels! Yet the crows and sparrows,

sir, have carried on this mysterious clamour ever since there was light and darkness. Some believe that they chant the hymn of thanksgiving to the Lord, whilst others call it a meaningless cry. But do you know what we think, sir? Every sundown the birds applaud, in one unanimous cry of relief, the exit of the sun, but ere long they shout out for him again: for they like the world around them, quickly tire of the change that they so very boisterously seek....

There's a joy, sir, which sends the blood rushing to the head, so that you almost feel that the earth is 'doing the *Lancers*, too. A joy, which suddenly grows like an adolescent, and presses for escape through one's sides and temples. Such joy was Nicolau's when he got home. For, strike me dead! sir, who should he see but Teresa herself, Teresa safe and sound and smiling! At such moments, however much you might stretch and fix your eyes, the sight like an atheist refuses to believe. And in order that his touch might prove what his sight could not, Nicolau instantly held Teresa in an iron grip.

The helpless creature screamed, and suddenly let go the pint she held in her hand. "Ootch! Ootch, what's come upon you, you wretch?" she cried through her teeth. "You must be mad. Ootch, I knew it would come to this!"

With his hands still about her waist, he looked resolutely into her eyes. "Terezina!" he half-shouted. "Terezina, I've done with drink forever, beloved!"

And falling to his knees, with joined hands, he stared at the family oratory.

"Heaven deliver us! This is downright sacrilege, you devil!" she shrieked at him, in wild astonishment. But he refused to listen. What was worse, he started weeping loud and long. And she left him to himself, with obvious impatience and disgust.

When he rose, at last, and accosted her again, she was shocked to see him shaking with laughter. "Hey Terezina, where were you hiding, my girl?" he asked her, tenderly. "You know, I looked for you everywhere, even..."

"Yes, everywhere, indeed," she broke in, frowning. "Everywhere except where you could have found me! Why, didn't you know that my sister's baby was to be christened to-day? My whole day was simply wasted in waiting for you—you, you..."

"What!" he gasped. "Bother it, that *feni* has even dried up my brains!... Terezina, they named him *Joseph*, eh?"

She nodded, and the red rose in her hair glowed like a coal in the flickering light of the *pontti* (earthen lamp).

Then suddenly both looked down at the spilled liquid on the floor. And Teresa muttered regretfully: "Natalina had sent you some, Nicolau...so that *you*, too, might join in..."

"What, *feni*! *feni*!" And a wild laughter shook the clouds: a laughter that mocked at all the sorrow

and anguish that had preceded it ; a laughter as long-lived as the good and holy Nicolau himself, as he tirelessly related the tale to his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren....

Yes, sir, that's what happened two hundred and thirty-nine years ago, when we, Goans, were good and simple, and God smiled at us from His throne in the stars. A simple tale about simple souls it is. But, do you know, sir?—we now cherish it more than ever: for, alas! it is a relic of our lost heritage !...

I've only told it to you in a foreign tongue, which is hardly worth the telling, I assure you. In the idiom of my own country, sir, it smacks like a rich dish whose savour lingers in the mouth long after one has lost his appetite and memory.

And now that I have finished, I wonder how much, with so many observations of my own, I have omitted to tell you in one hour what it took my father the better part of two rainy nights to relate !...

THE HARVEST

Four years in love—a fortnight more and they will be married.

Marjorie is twenty-six, tall and graceful, with a thoroughly womanly figure and dark, languishing eyes. Her sweet, little, bow-shaped mouth is forever wreathed in a smile, and her voice is a drowsy melody—the melody of brooks.

Her fiancé, Ronald, is by no means handsome, but he has an extremely amiable disposition and wonderfully attractive eyes. He is moreover learned and distinguished, and has drawn much experience from his thirty-five years.

These last days before marriage are marked by a peculiar nervousness. What with running to this store and that dressmaker, the hair-dresser and the jeweller, Marjorie is hard pressed for time, notwithstanding her appropriation of the moments that Ronald might indeed have called his own. So that Ronald's anxious parents are led to believe that their son is content to live on love rather than the coarse and common fare of ordinary mortals. And this, too, despite Ronald's protestations that he has all his breakfasts, lunches and dinners at Marjorie's.

They never were shorter, these breakfasts and lunches and dinners. Drawn-out breakfasts and lunches only add to the worry and impatience which a long

list of pending purchases already occasion. And restful, speechful dinners afford little time for the studied appreciation of what is bought and the discovery of what is still left to buy.

It is after one such dinner that Ronald and Marjorie are seated alone on a settee in Marjorie's verandah. Strangely enough the lovers to-night are minded of a little poetry. It is manna to love's votaries.

"Darling!" Marjorie lisps, peering into his eyes from the depths of her quivering soul, her eager mouth almost touching his. "Happy?"

Oh yes, he is happy: he is the happiest man in the world! But no word or gesture can do justice to his real feelings, so he kisses her tilted lips.

And instantly love's coals glow hotter in Marjorie's cheeks, and her luscious mouth is moist with the honey-dew which this hallowed rite is fain to deposit.

Then silence ensues: that ancient silence where the converse of hearted looks is more eloquent than mouthed harmonies.

But Marjorie's sky is suddenly overcast, like a bright morning in late September abruptly overtaken by the monsoon's last battery.

"You know, Rony?" she says, shifting over to a doleful key. Her aggrieved voice is like that of a prima-donna sucking a peppermint. "I wonder whether there's anything in what that horrid Margaret said to me this morning!"

There is a brief pause, occasioned by her trying to recollect Margaret's statement once again.

"You know?" she says. "The hussy comes to me, she sways her frightful hips and says: 'Madge, my girl, you're so feverish about your marriage, really! Pray, tell me, Madge,' she says, the jealous witch, 'haven't you already burnt your coals out with four long years of courtship? Surely, you don't for a moment imagine, Madge, that the smouldering ashes will suffice the long winter through?'"

And Marjorie looks worried and offended.

But Ronald only laughs, laughs like a philosopher who cannot quite get over some glaring human folly.

He then takes her by the waist. And Marjorie quickly draws the strength and comfort of that manly arm more firmly round her electric slenderness.

"Madge!" he says. He is still spilling with laughter. "Didn't you tell her: '*Now* comes the harvest?'"

She jerks her dimpled chin: an almost imperceptible movement, enchantingly regretful and reluctant.

"Didn't you?" he says. "Oh, Madge! and *you* a woman—*you* twenty-six!"

There is a pause once more. Such breaks are helpful to serious consideration.

"Burnt our coals out?" He suddenly grinds his teeth, in half soliloquy. "When we have only been

garnering the coal for the eternal blaze?... Ashes and Winter, indeed!"

But Marjorie only looks on indifferently. It is a strange look, both near and distant, dreamy and yet wakeful.

"Look here, Madge." He turns towards her. "Look here," he says, pressing his lips to hers in a smacking earnestness. "Listen darling!"

There is now a flickering reassurance in his soft, trustful eyes, and a caressing sweetness in his dry, stiff, logical voice.

"Listen, darling," he says slowly, with rounded emphasis on every syllable. "Listen. From your sweet silly sixteen right up to the comparatively sober age of twenty-two; and from my effulgent rashness to the half-ripe wisdom of thirty-one: we've had a long, long time to chew and digest our head-strong and precipitate follies, haven't we?"

Her answer is framed in a glistening-white smile.

"And we've both had our flirtations, Madge, haven't we?"

There is accord again, complete accord, finding expression in a rivulet of soft, rippling laughter.

"Well then, it was with these prerequisites that we met. What wonder if the cumulative effect is understanding, appreciation and love! Our knowledge of men and women has sharpened our sense of values.

And our mistakes—yes, our mistakes, which alone make men sensible and wise—have given us the right vision and perception.... If we've met and understood and loved each other, hung on to each other for four long years in spite of familiarity and the countless opportunities for readily detecting each other's weaknesses and failings, why, *who* then are better fitted to share a mutual and lifelong destiny?"

A brilliant exposition of an abstruse problem! And he looks immeasurably pleased and satisfied, satisfied because he has somehow succeeded in taking hold of the gossamer-skirt of this vital and elusive truth.

Then suspecting, perhaps, that his counterpart might just be an illusion, he swiftly runs his hand through her soft, silky hair.

And Marjorie instinctively nestles closer and closer to him, until her wonderful figure half reclines on his.

"Yes, Madge, *now* comes the harvest. The mustard seed, I'm sure, could never have yielded a greater.... We begin by building a home of our own...."

Home is purely a woman's domain, so Marjorie instantly breaks in:

"Darling, the house we've taken is much too expensive, don't you think?..."

Brick and mortar! This is certainly not *home*!
A *house* a *home*?

"Can you imagine, Madge?" he says, as though he has not heard her, his eyes swimming in a whirlpool of expectancy. "Soon we shall be crowded with smiles! The flowers that now turn you so dizzy will not be half so delightful or fascinating as the blossoms of our love. We shall re-live in them, and what we leave unachieved *they* shall achieve! Our love for each other, Madge, will then tower up to the very skies! And life will be as it never was: incredibly beautiful and wonderful!"

All along she has been peering at him intently, in patient wonderment. Now, suddenly, she finds her opportunity.

"Tell me, Rony," she says eagerly, blushing. "What shall it be? Often I've been thinking it over. A pair: is that it? Of course two boys and a girl would indeed be ideal. But, alas! one can hardly calculate in such matters!"

Despite which, a woman will deliberately discuss such futilities. So he carries on:

"Our love, darling, shall be a pivot. All our losses and griefs, all our failures and humiliations, all the gloom that flesh is heir to: will be robbed of their sting by our mutual sympathy, protection, comfort and consolation! And happiness, glory, fortune and success, why, they shall spell larger than their content and meaning, because there will be two kindred souls, merged and sunk into one, to receive and share them! If life was ever an inspiration or an ecstasy, Madge, it shall be then, *then* indeed!"

"But, Madge, know when we'll need each other most? Do you know when? When old. It's when we're old, we shall need our love as a prop indeed! I, for my part, shall need you more than ever to humour and nurse my weakness and age. For when life's at last a discarded and disregarded thing, who would care for me, Madge?—who but *you*, angel!—Madge *you*, my love!"

And Marjorie shudders and shrinks to half her shapely dimensions.

"Hope we die together," she says. "Oh Rony, how I dread the very thought of our separation!"

But the man looks unperturbed. His angular face even beams with a smiling confidence.

"Yesterday morning," he says, giving out the news in tantalising jets. "When you were at the hair-dresser's. And I was on the footpath, outside. Know what happened, Madge? You know? An old *yogi* approached me. One of those hermits from the hills. Who come down on some mysterious mission and fly hurriedly back again. As I looked into his soft, soothing eyes, my soul quivered with a strange delight. And instantly I greeted him with a reverent smile. He scanned me benignly for a moment. Searching my soul as it were. And then he said: 'To your goodness and wisdom, son, let me add happiness and good fortune. Soon you shall be married. And the woman you have, you shall hold to a ripe old age.... She shall bear you six stalwart sons and a lovely daughter.'

Marjorie gasps, horrified.

"Oh ! Oh, you dreadful man !" she says, hurriedly sitting astride his knees and pinching his nose. "So that's—*our* harvest !..."

THE SLIP

Even in callow youth, when those of my age were sportive and carefree and not a whit concerned about the world they lived in, I have wished I could change "this sorry scheme of things entire." Yes, even then it struck me that "God's in His Heaven, but all is wrong with the world."

Woman has meant much to me. Perhaps it is because I have had no mother, having lost her when I was just a babe. Perhaps only a woman can appease the hunger of my soul: an all-devouring and an all-encompassing hunger. Perhaps—who knows?—God has unveiled to me the mystery of *what* He made and what we carelessly call *woman*.

I was only fifteen at the time. But since then experience has joined to experience like the links of an endless chain, discovering all that is low and sordid, depraved and disgusting, tragic and terrible.

If I had always loved to disregard my father's cherished admonitions, it was, I suppose, because the primeval fascination to break the given order had been unduly infused into me. I smoked and drank; I read all sorts of proscribed literature.

Yes, I was only a lad of fifteen then. Impressions at that receptive age, it is said, endure forever. No wonder, it is all so fresh and vivid, so forceful and fearful, even to-day two and twenty years after....

One evening decked out like a man, with a boy's fancy to be considered older than his years, I was safely installed in a corner of the Café R—at Byculla. I was drinking beer, that delicious, frothy, refreshing beverage.

I was drinking it in greedy sips, when a woman suddenly entered. It was across the snowy summit of my newly replenished glass that I descried her.

Standing in the centre of the café, she cast vague glances at the men all round. Then looking terribly hurt and grieved, she moved slowly and undecidedly towards me and dropped listlessly into a seat at a table directly next to mine.

She looked completely worn and torn. And all about her seemed to hover a sense of frustration and fatality.

Somehow my gaze was drawn towards her : an intent gaze, perplexed and painful.

The bridge of her nose had given way. Her cheeks were hollow ; her bosom straight and flat ; and her figure bent, like one whose shoulders are bowed with weight.

Yet her small oval face bore dim traces of beauty, like a mocking memory. And in her glance, half sad and half desperate, there lingered still a touch of tenderness—the glimmer of the soul of a woman.

She would not drink. Nor did the waiters care to come to her. They only kept looking at her, and

then whispered something to each other and smiled mysteriously.

Occasionally she would glance at the men drinking, with a perfunctory smile, her eyes full of vague promises. But none of them seemed interested or concerned.

Some fifteen minutes elapsed in this manner. Then, suddenly, the head waiter, a sour-faced, impudent man, strutted across to the woman. "Go away!" he cried out. "If you don't, we'll call the police. How often must you be told : we serve drinks here?"

To me a woman is a woman. She was so even when I was a child. She was all the more so when I grew up into a precocious boy and could reason about her like any man. I could never flatter a man for being chivalrous. It is his duty to be so, because of the woman who bore him ; because of her who sprouted from the same old tree as he. It is a woman who will join hands with him in his life-long destiny. It is a woman, again, who will form part of his own flesh and blood.

The waiter, therefore, angered me. And pushing away my chair, I rose and accosted him.

"Hold your tongue, you dog," I said. "Or I'll teach you, do you hear?... The lady shall not leave."

The man was stunned. He showed it in his eye and shuffling foot.

But soon there followed a wild burst of laughter. It proceeded in disgusting, stentorian waves from all sides : a stormy proclamation of the folly of youth.

And my anger rose ; so did my charity.

"B-beasts !" I shouted at the men, glowering at them.

But they laughed all the louder.

Then the woman, growing suddenly bold, shouted in her turn :

"Beasts !—that's what you are. You've had your fill. May your bones rot in your own filth, you devils !"

Her words seemed to have clipped off their tongues. Instantly an intense calm prevailed : a sepulchral stillness, adjudging all their laughter as only a condonation of their own swinish guilt.

I turned towards her and smiled.

She sighed and thanked me.

"Say, what will you have ?" I said.

"Rum, please."

"And ginger ?—or soda ?"

She began tittering. "What a big man you are, really ?" she said. "No. Rum, just rum, please."

I gave the order. Then fetching my glass, I sat down beside her.

She was looking at me with a look of intense gratitude, smiling. In her smile I saw the one sudden triumph of those who have known nothing but defeat and humiliation.

She swilled the rum with a smack, and then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"One more, please—do you mind?" she said.

"Certainly not!" I said.

"What should I have done without drink and sleep?" she said, wondering.

"Why?"

"Don't you see?—sleeping, one forgets; so also, drunk."

"Forget what?" I said.

"Oh, you wouldn't understand!" She shook her head firmly. "Otherwise, it should certainly have been different!"

And she emptied the second glass as hurriedly as the first.

"What use is it being older than one's years?" she said. "As you are—or, as I was? The blood will remain what it is, so will the flesh."

I listened sorrowfully, mystified.

"How easy and thoughtless it was!" she said, in an awful undertone. "How common, my God!... Yet you have your name cancelled from the book of life—with not even a dog's chance!"

"Waiter," I called, under a strange impulsion. "Another rum and beer."

"You know?" she said. "Though I forever struggle to forget, all I do is remember.... But why are you staring at me like that?"

What could I say? Misfortune had come to her, a terrible misfortune, when young. But *what* could I say?

"How was I different from the other girls who slip in the lustihood of their treacherous youth?" she said. "How? *How*?... One little slip, when dreaming I tell you; and all's gone up in smoke—hope, love, marriage, home, *everything*!"

She finished the third peg, and suddenly sank into silence and shadow.

Some minutes after, she resumed her speech, but she had turned off from herself.

She scanned me tenderly, lovingly, the way my mother or sister would have done. "But why do you come here, eh?" she said. "This isn't a spot for boys like you."

I nodded, guiltily. I was overpowered by the realisation of what good might not have blossomed from this forlorn and unfortunate creature.

"My little man! why go out of your way to encounter misery?" she said. "Don't you know she does enough, prowling and pouncing by herself?"

And I put my arm round her. Even the thought of my stalwart father could not deter me.

But she laughed as though she were tickled. "You must be mad!" she said. "What am I?—nothing but dead flesh, I tell you!"

How could I agree? "Nonsense!" I said. "You are good and beautiful—I love you."

All at once there was an unearthly sparkle in her eyes. Like an enraptured being, she suddenly seized me and covered my face with rapid, burning-hot kisses.

And I wept, wept bitterly and long. Yet, those were the first kisses a woman ever bestowed on me and the dearest and best I have ever had.

Through my tears, I seemed to see her as when she was young: a girl in her bloom; lovely and fascinating; gay, lithe and lively; kind and gentle; her life full of hopes and dreams. A girl whom any man would have proudly married. A wife who would have made a home, that very home which all men in their time devoutly pray for....

But just then the clock struck nine, and the café R— was closed for the day.

When I had paid off the score, there were only three annas and two pice left in my little, brown, imitation leather purse purchased at the Bandra fair.

We moved along the footpath, slowly and silently, for quite a while. Our arms were tightly clasped round each other, protectively.

But as we came to the Victoria Gardens, my friend suddenly fixed her gaze skywards.

"It was a night like this," she said, in a far-off voice strangely in sympathy with events that were long past and irrevocable. "The same old moon was peeping from behind the tamarind tree, as it is now. And we two...exactly like this. We were returning from the pictures, after the nine o'clock show. *Miserable orphan ! Cursed seventeen !...* He was a neighbour, kind and attentive, young and handsome, but corrupt—how the devil was I to know ? In the sleepy light of the moon, his roving arm... God ! that slip cost me everything : syphilis ! *everything !...* My uncle, my mother's sister's husband, promptly cast me away. Ever since Auntie died he was swearing I was a burden on his hands. But *this* was too much for him.... It was not *his* fault, but *my* fate !... And sensitive, forlorn and penniless as I was, what could I do ?..."

In that question was the answer to her whole life : a virgin page splashed completely over by a bottle of black ink that had abruptly tilted—a page that could never be redeemed nor replaced !

"But what the hell am I doing here ?" she suddenly asked herself, looking around incredulously, as though she had just woken from a dream. Then, in less than a second, tearing away from me she was speeding across the Sussex Road : a ghost—a substanceless shadow !...

THE PEASANTS

On the left bank of the slender stream, which rolls merrily across the brow of my dear village, in a little wood live the peasants.

It was a good many years since I had seen these honest, hospitable souls, for my father's strange concern for my education had not allowed of my coming home even for my annual vacation.

On the morning following my return, therefore, the first thing I did was to enquire about Gabru and Sarah and then hurry to the little wood, often wondering on the way whether they would recognise in me the boy they had tenderly loved and for whom they had tirelessly reserved a daily quota of borahs, jackfruit, cashews or mangoes.

It was a joy indeed to look upon the good old countryside again ; to breathe one's own pure air and feel the thrill of light expanding lungs with a strange consciousness.

It was a joy still more to watch the familiar faces again. The toddy-tapper, Miguel, was climbing the cocoanut trees as usual, improvising a song as he jerked upward : the song that would certainly put heart into another Carnival. Oh, how he sang ! Everything seemed to listen to his vibrant air—the pensive trees, the crested waters of the playful stream, and even the gloomy hay-stacks looking all

the more gloomier with their drying cow-dung cakes. It was a love-song he was improvising. And every time he espied a peasant girl pass by, from his perch high up in the fronds, he would put her name into his song, and the heart-whole creature would abruptly come to a standstill, look up for a moment with smiling, enraptured eyes, and then as if suddenly reminded of something, she would tilt her charming head and move hurriedly onwards.

Oh yes, it was good to be home! Good to see happiness sucked slowly and reflectively out of a mango. Good to see young beaming peasant faces, seated in a community round a jackfruit by the wayside, each constantly picking at its juicy fruit, smacking his tongue with a savage relish, and then carefully piling up the seed for a further repast on some dark, blustering, wet day! Good to see the vivacious *Kunbi* (Aboriginal) girls, with their dark, oily faces and glistening yellow teeth, carrying faggots to the village market suspended on their erect heads! How rhythmically they pawed the soft, red earth, their balanced, swinging arms fully covered with thick, bone bangles from wrist to elbow! And with what delightful abandon they switched their wonderfully-curved fleshy hams! Married or unmarried, the fluttering upper flap of their meagre sarees nonchalantly revealed their vital desires pointing in a twin sharpness to the enamoured heavens!...

Our stalwart peasant, Gabru, was squatted outside his little hut on the clean cow-dunged floor, with nothing to his skin but a red kerchief tucked about his loins. He was smoking a large, plantain-leaf *viddi*.

Every time he puffed at it, he would fill the air with dense rings of pungent smoke and then look up at the sky.

His back was turned towards me, and I was therefore able to take a good look at him. He seemed as strong and muscular as ever. He had the same old relentless jaw. Only his dark, matted hair now disclosed a sprinkling of silver-grey.

His eye was traversing the sky again, when I drew his attention to my presence with a shuffling foot.

Glancing swiftly across his shoulder, he sprang to his feet and mumbled : "God give you good day, sir !"

He then snuffed out the *viddi* with his thumb and deposited it under the silver girdle at his waist.

He stared hard at me. Who was I ? Where had he seen me—known me ?

I might have smiled the same old way, looked at him the same old way, but I was no longer the plump, dumpy lad Gabru had caressed and whom my school-mates had nicknamed "pumpkin" once. I was a tall, slender, young man now, with a well-trimmed moustache to boot.

Gabru did not recognise me, and I was glad. That recognition would have spoiled everything. He would have treated me like my father, his *batcara* (landlord), with a clipped speech and guarded silence : with that disgusting consciousness which would instantly shut me out of his world.

I had returned his greeting, but his determined eye was still fixed wonderingly on me, and I said in fearful haste: "Sultry weather, eh?"

"Yes, oh yes!" he said, as though he were tremendously grateful for some sympathy urgent and dearly offered. And he looked up at the heavens once again, and then at the paddy-fields which stretched desolately ahead of us, far, far into the hot glarish distance, beyond the eye's reach.

"There's a drought," he said. "Seems to me we are lost!..." Then, suddenly, realising that I was standing, he looked guilty and ashamed. "How forgetful of me! Oh!" And almost flying into his hut, he emerged with a low wooden stool, wiping it with his hand.

I thanked him and sat down.

"It's already a fortnight since the Saint's feast," he said. He was squatting on the ground a few paces away. "And not a drop, not a single drop of rain, as you see. We've done all we could. Our little ones have filed through the village and the fields for as long as ten days. 'St. Anthony, give us rain, give us rain, do give us rain!' But nothing happens, nothing! Tchah! even innocence counts for little nowadays!"

His brow was now dented by parallel currents of some heavy onrush of dark misgiving. "'The world's grown mighty proud and wicked,' says his reverence to me yesterday. 'The rain, it falleth upon the just and unjust,' he says. 'And if the unjust are to be punished, the just must suffer too.'"

Then drawing nearer, his voice hushed : "Know what else he told me ? What his reverence told me ? 'Gabru, men no longer believe in God !' he said. And I laughed. '*Padre* Ludovico,' I said, 'you know us peasants—a simple lot. But this, your reverence, *this* is too much for even my goose to gobble down. Not believe in God, your reverence !' 'Yes, Gabru, yes,' he says. 'I'm not joking, man. It's true, as true as the famine that grins and grimaces at us now !' I was dumbfounded. How could it ever be ! Believing in God is like breathing, I tell him. Nobody tells you to do the one or the other. You believe in God instinctively and reason afterwards : much the way you breathe, and only understand *why* when you look upon a dead man !"

Here, he suddenly remembered something. His face bore the expression of one who had received intimation of a pending catastrophe. Hurriedly excusing himself he disappeared into the hut.

"My Joanna's with the oxen," he shouted to me from within. "The wife's at the master's paying off some old dues on the hire of the paddy-fields. A man sometimes has to be a woman too, ha-ha-ha !"

He was back in a few minutes. "I was just in time," he said, smiling. "I've strained the rice. And they'll make the curry—good, fish curry, worth all the dishes at a *batcara's* table !"

"Fish ?" I said. There was hardly any fish available at this time of the year. "Where do *you* buy fish ?"

He arched his shaggy eyebrows. "Buy?" he repeated slowly. "Where do we, peasants, buy fish? Goodness me! when we can hardly afford our rice and *conjee*!" He laughed, as though I had said something incredible, something utterly impossible. "Whatfor did God give us a stream then? And why put He there His finest fishes? Besides, He taught us how to catch them—like that," he said, snapping his fingers. "Yes, a whole *vorli*-ful (basketful) of fish, when your fisherman has just put to sea and not even cast his nets!"

Never having seen Gabru catch fish, I was intrigued. I grew excited as a child.

"It's some festival-dish of a worm that does the trick," I ventured. "Maybe, it's a ten-pronged hook, a hook you make yourself. Or a fish-call, for all I know—some soft, rolling enticement that gives my lady-fish the dope and you your wonderful curry!"

He listened in smiling triumph, with a delightful patience, and then shook his head in deep, decisive waves.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, laughing. "But it's like your telling us what Our Lord and the angels have for breakfast—a thing they alone can tell us, or we'll never know!... Listen. It's nothing! Listen. Just wade into the stream at night. A *vorli* slung round the shoulder, a glowing sheaf of fronds in one hand and a sharp *koito* (chopper) in the other. Spotting a couple, you fix the red death on them. And they are done: no better than your toy-fishes. Then..."

"Dash-dash plumps my *koito*," I said, transported with impish delight. "And dup-dup, dup-dup, go my half-fishes into my *vorli*!"

It was wonderful! I longed to go through the thrill of it all and I was just on the point of telling him so, when suddenly I heard the tinkle of cattle-bells. And looking ahead of me I saw five fat, dappled oxen, and a tall, slender girl in a red skirt and white sleeveless blouse.

The dopey, unconcerned creatures were coming straight into us, but the herds-woman was as nimble as a squirrel. Moving swiftly from the rear, in a semicircle, to where we sat, she brandished her long stick at them, chuck-chucking sweetly all the while, till she finally led them into a bamboo yard nearby. Then having tied them to their stakes and patted them gently on their haunches, she disappeared into the hut: but not before she had taken one hurried comprehensive look at me, her head poised in a magnificent lightness.

She was a fascinating girl indeed. Wonderfully fresh and healthy, with smooth, rounded arms and goodly breasts. A smile forever hovered about her little mouth: an inexplicable smile, delightful in the extreme, which instantly put me in mind of a sleeping babe communing with God and the angels.

I had fixed my gaze on her the moment I saw her. Something clean and fresh about her, something pleasant and warm, an indefinable charm and sweetness, made me look in her direction long, long after she was no more to be seen.

And Gabru who had all along been watching me, with a secret satisfaction, was at last prompted to speak.

"That's Joanna," he said. "The slightest glimpse of pain or sorrow, and my daughter's heart bursts like a monsoon cloud.... Everybody has a good word for the child."

And, suddenly, he commenced scrutinising me again. "I feel I know you," he said. "But I just can't say." And he scratched his head half-angrily. "It's my age, I'm sure.... Tell me, wouldn't I be wrong in taking you for a stranger?"

I was almost about to tell him; but that old fear restrained me once more. How then would he talk to me about Joanna? How talk to me about so many things as he was now doing? After all, it was only a question of some half hour or so. His wife would certainly convey the news to him on her return. Why then spoil happiness, the short-lived happiness of a few honest, irrecoverable moments!

"You would definitely be wrong if you considered me anything else," I therefore told him. "A stranger, that's what I am. A perfect stranger! There's hardly anything I know about this village."

He kept staring at my brow. "No. No, you're not a stranger," he said. "That forehead of yours is as familiar to me as my own clubbed thumb."

I laughed in spite of myself. "I haven't given up," he said. "Wait a bit and I'll tell you. It's there,

see ?” He tapped his head. “But like many things one can’t... Oh yes, it’s there alright.”

Joanna just then flashed into sight, picked up the grinding-stone, and soon became a disturbing memory once more.

My glance was sharp-set. It took immeasurable mouthfuls of that hurried banquet.

Gabru watched on as before. Then, gazing into my eyes and detecting there goodness knows what, his grim face suddenly took on an air of confidence. He decided to tell me about his daughter.

And I encouraged him. “She’s wonderful,” I said. “Your Joanna’s wonderful! Come, tell me about her.”

He smiled gratefully. Then hesitating somewhat, he said : “What shall I tell you ? That my Joanna’s as fresh and tender as the rose which opens its young heart to the rising sun ! And yet as full of energy as any sapling that stoops under its own joyous load !...”

Everything was stern and tough about Gabru, except his soft, kindly eyes. But with his present emotion, even his hard, inexorable jaw twitched and dropped, revealing in no uncertain manner the tender spirit that was encased in that fierce, iron-textured cell.

“What should I have done without her !” he said. It seemed as though he had asked himself this question ever since she was born, day in day out, hour upon hour. “I look at her, and I am full ! I think of her, and my heart grows light ! I hold her in

my arms and feel I shall forever remain young and strong!... No child had we for years, and people eyed us with pity and surprise. But we didn't despair! My Sarah and I kept on hammering at God's heart. And what didn't He give us at last? That's why she's called *Joanna*: the gracious gift of God. His reverence has taught her all sorts of clever things. Do you know, sir? My Joanna can read and write. She keeps our community's accounts—no *batcara* can fool us now!"

And putting out his broad, hairy chest he laughed, in a challenging confidence.

But the career of his deep-breathed laughter was abruptly cut short by a shrill, urgent voice calling out to him from the hut. It was Sarah. She had evidently entered the hut from behind.

"Gabru! Gabru, the master refuses to take the money," she bawled out in her peasant fashion. "'Some other time, Sarah,' he said, pushing away my hand. 'Some other time, woman. Things are soon going to be pretty tough and that money will come of use. Give it to me some other time.' God bless his heart!... But, Gabru, *ah-reh* Gabru, I have news for you, wonderful news!..."

The massive peasant jumped to his feet with a vibrant thud.

But Sarah was already in the doorway. "Hey Gabru!" She rolled her eyes as if she had come into a fortune. "The young master's back, at last! Cyprian, the cook, says he's become a great doctor. Wonder

whether he will ever see us now! Will he ever come for his share of mangoes now!..."

"What!" Gabru ran guiltily across to me and locked me in his crazy arms. And then, as though it were his wife who was to blame for it all, squaring himself and looking ridiculously serious, he said: "Sarah, where are your eyes, you stupid woman? And *who* think you *this* is? Master Pobre's been here for over an hour. Where else would a bird fly but to its own nest, you silly woman?"

And Sarah gaped at me, enraptured. She measured the length and breadth of me with unbelieving hands, thanking God a thousand times on my account. Then, suddenly, rushing into the hut she returned with chillies and salt. I had to be purged at once of the evil eye, that terrible blight which seems to be the cause of all evil in a village.

And then the two old peasants, with their hands on my shoulders and their eyes glued to my face, plied me with a thousand hurried questions.

What was I doing all this time? Did I ever think of them? And didn't I miss my mangoes and jackfruit? And how could I ever have remained from coming home, coming to good old Goa, for as long as fourteen years?...

Even Joanna threw away her delightful modesty and slipped so close as to touch my knees, smiling at the height of her rustic hospitality, and looking as fascinating and lovely as God made Eve.

And overwhelmed with all this goodness, all this kindness, all this concern and affection, I began to weep like a child—when Gabru suddenly offered me my quota of mangoes.

And what a quota it was! A quota doubled many times over, making up as it were for my long, incredible, hard absence !...

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

My life was empty now : stark empty ! What, then, was there to live for ? Only anguish and torture would fill the interminable gloom of the long after-years ; only frustration strain its arms in mockery to clasp unto the bosom the vacant air. Oh, how good it would be—what a blessing, indeed—if the curtain suddenly dropped and released the actor from his act !

For hours I brooded over it all. I looked for an opiate in the wide recesses of my soul and mind. But where, alas ! was the familiar comfort that had beguiled all the preceding griefs and losses ? Griefs and losses which I could laugh at in my present affliction : affliction many-edged, wedging its razor-keenness deep down into the heart at the lightest touch of memory !

Then Joseph entered. "Hullo," he said. Disappointment was sharply expressed in his averted face, where thought had eaten into the flesh and hewn deep caverns for observation.

"I had to meet you at 7 o'clock," he said, glancing at the chaotic room and then at my father's pencilled portrait. "At 7 in the morning, even on the very knock ! And with none of my inherent laziness, too !" he chuckled. "But when 7 o'clock came, and I came..."

And then, for the first time, he looked straight into my eyes, still on the challenge, in no way disposed to lay the cudgels down.... Yes, such is Joseph's temperament, and yet, God knows, this censure of his is more welcome to me than all the oiled sweetness of other men !

But looking into my eyes, he had suddenly glimpsed at the wound that was eating into my soul.

Joseph is the one solitary man who has ever understood me : all my weaknesses and failings, the full depth and breadth and height of me ! Since the day I discovered him, I have hugged him to my bosom with a jealous care and joy. He is the one friend I have : this hungry-eyed, bony, jewel of a man born, perhaps, only to lighten and fill up my days

The griefs and joys, the triumphs and defeats of friends are terribly infectious. And all at once my sorrow had drawn another victim into its toils. Joseph was now an altogether different man : anxious and perturbed, his eyes full of a healing balm.

"But what's wrong ?" he asked, after having wrestled with his own mind and failed. He could have trudged to the ends of the world, if needs be, to restore the happiness of a friend. "It's not Violet, is it ?—that execrable beauty who hasn't enough blood in her heart to remain loyal to any single man !"

No, it wasn't Violet. She was a good girl, and he and I knew that she wouldn't fail to be good even if she loved another man. Why blame her ? The human heart is a despot ! One cannot be

happy without being a willing subject in its kingdom, where the seats of reason and judgment are empty

And I turned back to my sorrow, while Joseph vainly groped in the blinding mists of mystery.

No doubt I was torturing Joseph. There was not a secret of mine he had not shared. His capacious and understanding heart had become the safe depository of all my sins and sorrows, all my fears and hopes.

My present affliction, however, was too hideous to confess. It was rather content to be buried in its own shame.

Still, what did it matter now? Wasn't it all over? Hadn't my secret now lost its magic, its rapture, and even its appalling blackness?

"Joseph!" I said, "she's dead! My beloved is dead!"

He gave a half-imperceptible start and looked distractedly into my face.

"She's dead, Joseph: that exquisite being with whom I shared the only ecstatic hours of a dull existence has quitted this cruel world!"

And I suddenly turned towards my friend. "Remember my last illness?" I said. "Joseph, remember? When you kept constant vigil over me, as befitted a kindred soul, and never rested until I came through?"

Oh yes, he remembered. Very well, indeed. "You were in a frightful delirium," he said. "The doctors could make nothing of your case. All through you called out to some fictitious being. 'Judith ! Judith ! Judith !' you whispered, you shouted, you cried.... Yes, now I understand *who* Judith was "

Judith ? Oh, misery ! Oh, that woeful name !

In the sharpness of my grief, I gazed dumbly at Joseph. But he would not speak. He had realised the helplessness of it all.

"Joseph, what wouldn't I give for a few more minutes with that woman of my heart !" I said, after a heavy pause. "Ah ! how my memory, in this awful bankruptcy, clings to every little thing we said and did on that evening of the 18th of December, when for once the world looked young and beautiful, and elusive happiness was in a humour to be wooed !...

"The sun was about to rest in all his glory. He lay in a luxurious couch overhung with a thousand riotous-coloured draperies. The birds and sea sang him a lullaby. And the clouds, like countless vestals, blushed at this full-blooded lover blessed with the springs of perennial youth.... Seated on a bench in the L— Park, I drank in the pageant, inebriated to the full pulse of my being.

"And then my dream began. At that tense moment, Joseph, the jealous sea had pressed her voluptuous lover to her heaving bosom.... Yes, it was just then that I saw her coming towards me,

like one entrusted with the bitter mission of heralding the exit of glory. She was weeping, weeping profusely, and rather than break the sad harmony, the trees soon wept, and even the hard-hearted stones !

“Ah ! how vivid and fresh it all is ! It has become an inextricable part of me, destined to live and die with me—oh no, not die, for death has no power over love !...

“Her hair, her lovely hair, was dishevelled, Joseph. She put me in mind of beauty that had met with foul outrage : that was looking for gallantry upon earth, looking for the image of God in man !.. Yet, there was no hurry in her step. A slow, rhythmic movement it was, suggestive of no welcome ahead.

“She passed me, insensible to all things. And I looked on, lost, magnetised ! Reluctant and fearful, ever more reluctant and fearful, grew every step she took. And suddenly I ran after her, my soul trembling like some helpless leaf in a storm. I vowed I would protect her by all the canons of heaven and earth : I swore I would love her, love her sacredly—eternally.

“I spoke to her. I said : ‘Fair and gentle lady, do not distress yourself so. I’m at your service. I mean it if ever man meant anything.’

“She started. She had not seen me, nor known I was approaching. Quickly wiping the tears from

her eyes, her sad, caressing eyes, she stared into my face gravely and suspiciously, like one who had lost faith in man and the world, utterly. Then, glancing undecidedly all round, she began scanning me, she gazed into my eyes once more. And slowly an air of confidence took possession of her. She smiled, but her smile was cynical and bold, as though she had suddenly thrown discretion and propriety to the winds and hardly cared where she was or what she did.... And so, Joseph, we were soon seated on the very bench where erstwhile I had contemplated the grandeur of the world....

"Like one on the weary hunt for comfort and protection, she sat close by my side, her exquisite little figure well pressed against mine and her gentle breath even playing on my face. We then both smiled, both looking at each other tenderly, out of the deep understanding of our hearts, which there and then were forever fused into one. She was still looking at me. 'How amiable you are!' she said, and at once sighed with a sense of futility and defeat. A dreamy, plaintive voice, soothing, soft as velvet! And I went stark mad. 'Come, tell me,' I said. 'Why were you weeping just now? If some thoughtless, heartless one has jilted you, what need you care, beautiful one? Say but the word, and a thousand young men will scramble to your dainty feet and pray humbly for your hand! Lady, what need you care!' But she only smiled; smiled, I thought, at the rabid outburst of an youthful devotion, which seemed to flavour of untruth even to one who was herself young and ardent....

"And then she looked ahead of her, with set teeth. 'See there?' she said. 'That cemetery there? I've just returned from my father's grave, falling prostrate upon which, even now, I wept like a helpless child. He died of diabetes three months ago, but not before he had seen his Judith, his only child, enter into wedlock. He was a rich man, and all his money devolved on me—I mean, my husband [...]"

Oh, my heart, where had'st thou led me! Into what impossible straits and forlorn waters!

"Joseph, my hopes were dust! A voice instantly smote on my heart with outcries of illicit love; love that was shut out from me; love that could never be mine! But she suddenly put her arm caressingly round my neck. She rubbed her cheek against mine, tenderly and lovingly. 'Believe me, to-day's the happiest day of my life,' she said. 'I had never dreamt I would meet you.... Tell me, aren't you happy, too?' Joseph, could I deny it? My soul leaped up in answer to that question. For shame, cold reason met with a cold dismissal! And thereupon the social and moral structures of the world crumbled down in a shapeless heap. 'Happy!' I said. 'Am I happy? Oh Judith!... Yet, how will it all end, love? How could it but otherwise end?' But she quickly rose and drew me by the hand. 'Come,' she said. 'Come let's celebrate our love. We'll cement it with all the pleasures that we can feverishly cram into niggardly time. Our moments shall be eternal! Come, let's visit hotels and cafés. Let's drink, dance and sing, pour ourselves

into each other : even till we sicken of the very thing we crave. That's the only refuge for our desperate souls !'

"It was then a quarter past seven, Joseph. We dipped in and out of hotels and cafés : pledged eternal love out of a single glass ; danced and sang to weariness. Yes, we clipped each other to our bosoms : kissed each other in a frenzy—as though the end of the world was nigh. And we made love to each other, love cast in emotion and words, Joseph, that must have overshadowed the love of any epoch or era !...

"But can you guess what she did at the B— Café, Joseph ? Know what she did ? Suddenly drawing up her skirt, she exposed the wounds on her thigh. 'Beloved, would you, too, have done this to me ?' she said. Then came the explanation : 'Last night, I spurned him away like the dog he is. But he kept insisting on his rights, and I screamed at him : "You devil ! can you still go on talking of rights when you've robbed me of all my sacred right to happiness ?— when you've already wasted half my fortune on putrid flesh ?..."'

"And for the first time, those sad, caressing eyes flashed with anger and hatred. Ah, what a terrible plight ! What an irony, Joseph ! Young and beautiful and rich, yet miserable and wretched !... But she didn't allow her distress to spoil our happiness. Soon she buried me in her arms. 'Beloved !' she said. 'You know, I'm filled with a strange delight and satisfaction. Oh ! I can hardly believe I've found you : the

dear one for whom my soul has forever hungered ;
the righteous one who'll shield me and restore justice
in the world !'

"Yet all through, true to love's instinct, she never asked me who I was, or what I did, or even where I stayed. Nor was I curious, too. At no time did I make question of her father or her husband, though once I overheard her blurt out her father's name. Yes, such knowledge would come in love's own appointed time, spontaneously, unsought.

"And so, Joseph, the envious hours fled on the lightning wing of pleasure and romance : hours, I'm sure, that were never briefer in the weary and lagging revolution of time.... And then...and then, Joseph...then, suddenly, she walked out of my life, very much the way she had walked in ! It was at the Hotel H—, when the clock had struck eleven with ever-heightening malice. Oh, Joseph, whatever made me leave her alone ! Fool ! fool that I was !.... In the midst of a cabaret dance, when the voluptuous Hawaiian, sleek and slim and tall, was in the maddening whirl of her *Hula-hula*, leaving Judith I had repaired to the cloak-room. Detestable fate ! in the fraction of a second she was gone—gone forever ! A man, uncouth and drunk, had rushed in, grabbed her by the hand and dragged her rudely away. So the bearer told me on my return....

"Now you know, friend, the cancer that's devastating my soul. Would you believe it, Joseph, ever since I looked for her in every nook and corner of this big town ? In cafés, hotels, parks—and even

in that cemetery from which she had stepped into my life, like a dream ! But I never found her. I never found my Judith !”

“But how do you know she’s dead ?” Joseph enquired. It was the one solitary question he put me in my long and weary confession.

“Yes. Yes, Joseph,” I said, “that’s what I was just about to tell you. In fact, it explains why I was not able to come with you to the — Caves this morning, my friend.... You know, Joseph, last night I dreamt of her. Yet, I couldn’t persuade myself it was a dream. Gliding gently into bed wreathing her arms round my neck, with her lips growing to my forehead, she said : ‘Beloved ! Beloved, it’s Judith. See ! I’m happy ! happy forever !...’ Saying which she gave me that same soft, caressing look, doomed to haunt me all my days. And I woke up with a start, straining my arms to hold her, and in that fullness feel the emptiness of life only a pleasing joke. But, alas ! she was gone, and my hands dropped heavily to my sides with the overpowering sense of the riddling mockery of human fate !

“It was then only two in the morning. But, Joseph, how could I any longer sleep ? My spirit was restless, my torture complete ! She was happy ? Happy forever ? How ?—unless she were dead ; unless death, that grim monster, had had pity on her, and released her, once and forever, from this selfish and cruel world ; and from that beast who had brazenly stepped to the altar and routed God’s own ordinance !

"Then, suddenly, Joseph, I can hardly explain how, I found myself in that cemetery, in that terrible city of the dead, where countless generations have been gathered in oblivion's musty folds, as though a few hot tears had had the power of cancelling their memory eternally! Husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, sinners and saints, friends and enemies: all, all of them! The rich and the poor, the great and the small, the distinguished and the unknown, the powerful and the helpless, with no exception whatsoever, all laid to their little measure in the dungy earth!

"In the bright light of the moon, I moved from grave to grave, in awe, with a feeling that the dead were grinning at me, grinning because, unlike me, they were possessed of the great secret of God and existence! From grave to grave I moved, looking for Judith, looking for her everywhere. In the centre of the grave-yard was her father's tomb, a costly and superb piece of art befitting a man of wealth and position. I looked at it and pondered over the majestic irony of all our pomp and greatness.

"And then my gaze turned on the grave next to his. It was a fresh grave, not dressed in cold marble yet, buried in a huge pile of funeral wreaths and crosses. I snatched at the largest wreath, which rested proudly on the top of them all, and read the inscription: 'To Judith, my darling wife: the best and dearest of women. M——.'

"And instantly my life ebbed out of me. Even before I knew it, Joseph, I had already fallen prostrate

on that grave : my eyes spouting the sorrow of the world, my heart crushed with grief piled upon grief. And all I kept crying was : 'Judith ! Judith ! Judith !' till out of sheer weariness of body and soul I had lost even the power to pronounce that beloved name !

"But when I rose to depart, to turn back to a world shorn of all its beauty and love, all its happiness and hope, where despair, emptiness and futility would now cry havoc on all living things : I saw her, Joseph, I saw her break feverishly from the cold embraces of the earth—she rushed into my arms. A moment more and it would be dawn. Yes, there was Judith in my arms, which then held in an airy softness all the treasure that man can conceive or devoutly pray for ! She was unlike herself. She had infinitely surpassed herself. She was beautiful—but how beautiful, Joseph, who can say, having as she did the touches of the Supreme Artist all over her now !... Clinging to me, faster and stronger than all the bonds of earth, she looked into my eyes ; she looked tenderly and resolutely into my eyes. And I felt my soul flutter like a criminal's. 'Righteous, why all this sorrow and sadness !' she said. 'Isn't your love pure and powerful enough to suffer my release from a cruel and sinful world ? Take heart, beloved, in the...' Then, suddenly, like one terribly frightened, hurriedly planting a soft kiss on my fevered brow, my Judith melted away, oh Joseph !... And I went straight to church, in the glimmering dawn, and prayed for hours : prayed, like a mad man, for I scarcely know what !..."

THIS GENERATION !

“You’ll not listen, master ! Stubborn—stubborn as mules, that’s what you young people are !”

When Adam addresses me as “master”, you may be certain that his loyalty has been seriously provoked and that a storm is brewing.

It was not for nothing that my grandfather adopted him as one of the household ! And woe to the man who dare suggest that Adam would otherwise have not been left to starvation, ignorance and drudgery—like the rest of the foundlings in *Canaconam* !

Adam has sacrificed his youth and manhood to our family. Gratitude that can even encroach on a man’s taking a wife and making a home of his own is rare indeed !

“Just imagine a man coming home,” Adam says, “at three in the morning, when the rest of God’s world is as good as dead ! Such things were unheard of in the old days. Prowling there then certainly was, oh yes !—but it was left to the wolves and hyenas, not men. Tchah ! *this* generation is accursed !”

Breakfast which is bad enough when one is woken from his sleep with a splitting head, becomes unbearable indeed with Adam at the opposite end of the table remonstrating with fierce gesticulations and a mouth more sour than a whole mouthful of vinegar could ever make it.

"Look at you!" he points out, in a soft insinuating voice which calls upon the very doors and chairs and tea-pot, and the twelve Apostles on the wall seated to the Last Supper, to take a good note of me. "Just look at you! Is that a condition to be in, really! Who feels older? I ask. And for whom does the earth yearn and gape this very moment? Ah! what a shame—*shame!*"

If there is an interruption to these icy gusts, it is only because Adam is in no mood to overlook his breakfast, even though the tea invariably splutters down his patriarchal beard on his abruptly taking hold of the broken thread.

I look at Adam with disgust and annoyance. But he will not relent. He is the custodian and guardian of our interests, he will tell you of his own accord. His role with my grandfather was that of a son. With my father that of a brother. And with me both that of grandfather and father—terribly so, in fact, now that those two are only watching my interests, silently, from the clouds.

Sipping some tea he grunts, and is at it again with reinforced vigour.

"Know how nice it is when one's doing the zig-zag? Or when one's tongue is heavier than a prattling babe's?"

"Adam, for God's sake, stop it, will you?" say I. "Please!"

But Adam has his responsibility. How then can he ever relax his hold of it?

"And I can tell you who you were with, yes ! A beautiful animal, that's what I think her. Handsome is that handsome does. But, what on earth, does your fair one do ? Just lisp and paint, regard her frock as her skin, and giggle, giggle away at everything—the dainty fool ! Devilish proud your sons will be of such a mother : say I didn't tell you !

It is useless arguing with Adam, for that is where he derives his inspiration. The stream of his eloquence then turns into a *Dud-sagar* cascade.

"And only sixteen too—what a world ! Out with Francis to-day. Out with Joseph tomorrow. Out, out, with Dick, Henry, James and John : gliding into love as though her cursed heart were forever dipped in oil ! Lord of lords ! what's come upon *this* generation ! Even if doomsday were another 6000 years hence, it were jolly well better if the four angels trumpeted it now, *now* ! The progeny of hell : that's what such women are !"

I wince, but Adam is as grim as ever. It is his duty to be firm with an erring son.

"I put it to you : if she who's to be a hold on a man, needs all the hold herself, what good can come of the world, eh ? If a woman, too, drinks and smokes and runs riot, what becomes of home—the human race ? If it's taken progress and civilisation to turn you into animals, a fig for your rotten progress and civilisation, say I ! And mind ! these are only the beginnings. To-day, it's just a question of a glass of beer, two or three glasses of wine, four to five cigarettes, a little mouthing and cuddling.

But, tomorrow, *tomorrow*, it shall be the freedom of the air. The birds, I tell you, will not be floating about the way you'll do. There shall be no home. Children will grow up into one thing or another, as though they were born of the stones on the roadside. And if anything's sent to the gallows, it shall be morality. You pretend not to believe me now. But some day you'll sigh and say: 'Adam was right after all! Ah, what a pickle we are in!'

In his frightful earnestness to correct me, Adam passes sentence on civilisation and the whole of this generation: a tangent common to age in its remonstrations with youth.

Then, suddenly, there is a cataclysmic change in Adam. Everything is now in keeping with his age: his mellow eyes, his arms folded sedately on the table, his benign posture.

"Surely, you understand why I'm telling you all this, h'm? You've got to live up to your good name. Ha-ha, see what I've been trying to tell you? It all boils down to this. The rest, I must confess, was by the way, by...ha, ha, ha!"

But, holy Moses! what do you think happens when Adam is stroking affectionately my shoulder, with the sinner looking as contrite as a soul in Purgatory? Alas! what? Another of *this* generation suddenly adorns the doorway, lisping her "Good morning!" with a full set of shining white teeth, and lips as soft and moist as the morning rose!...

THE CUCKOO

Kook-koo——kook-koo——kook-koo——kook-koo...

"Drat that bird!" I cried out in exasperation, rushing into the shade of the mango tree on which my teaser was securely perched.

Kook-koo——kook-koo——kook...

"Stop it, you fool!" I shouted at him. "Devil of a singer you consider yourself, don't you? Kook-koo, kook-koo, kook-koo!... If you had only heard our girls sing the *mando*,* my friend, you would have held your head low and been hushed into silence forever!"

Fixing his blood-shot eyes on me with head inclined, he hearkened to my clamour, terribly amused.

"It's a fortnight since I returned to my village," I went on. "And every day at this self-same hour you start this *colovont*† stuff—why?... You'll tell me, of course, that you are announcing Autumn, and that you are the herald of the seasons and what not—oh yes! But what I would like to know is why you keep on kook-kooing at this calm and languorous hour: when our men are content to drowse in the lap of the fragrant warmth ... and our women, above all, are busy with what they have always been?"

This ineffectual raving is a peculiar failing of mine. Somehow, I have never been able to accept

*National dance

†Dancing-girl

any jar on the composure of my soul, the more so when the agent is a bird or beast.

But what was my astonishment, when *this* cuckoo started talking, in a voice very much like our own—and in good, fluent *Concanim* too!

"We have an oath amongst us birds never to mouth it like you humans," he said. But, in this instance, I see that I must, lest you take me for a fool! This is my brief answer to you long-winded barbarism: I keep on kook-koo-ing at this hot and tragic hour because I just can't stick the folly of you humans. Don't tell me that you are not aware that the worst of your village bulletins are circulated at this very hour which you are disposed to clothe in poetry!"

"The worst...of our bulletins...circulated...at this very hour?" I repeated, incredulously.

He nodded cynically. "It takes us birds to observe you humans," he said. "One surely can't observe his kind, when he is himself like one of them...can he, sir?"

It was a great truth, indeed, and my eye widened in appreciation. "Bravo! Bravo, cuckoo!" I said, almost beside myself with joy. "Really, I hadn't guessed that you were that wise, you know? I owe you an apology for my brusqueness. Please forgive me, will you?"

"It's alright," he said, as though forgiveness was a simple virtue amongst his tribe; as if understanding, which we humans so profoundly lack and which,

indeed, is the cause of most of our suffering and grief, was what the birds had wisely and resolutely cherished ever since God bestowed it on creation.

And wishing to excuse myself further, I said :

"You see, cuckoo, we humans think so poorly of you birds, that I was hardly conscious when I first addressed you. It was so natural and spontaneous, you know. I suppose you all are aware of our belief about you birds : that you have no souls, and that the after-world is only for rationals such as us ; that you cannot aspire to Heaven—or even to Hell, for that matter...."

I heard a faint chuckle. "Listen to *our* belief," he said, still chuckling. "Eternity was given to you humans, so that you may suffer for your depravity eternally. Of all creation, you *rationals* alone are the most foolish, insolent and ungrateful. 'But what about Heaven then ?' you'll ask. And I make reply : 'But, good sir, which of you ever get there ?'

And here he abruptly resumed singing.

"Hey, hey !" I called.

He stopped. "Sorry," he said, in the regretful tone of one who had been dragged out of a delightful dream.

This thoughtlessness of his, this sudden forgetfulness of my presence, set me thinking.

"Look here, cuckoo," I said. "This recent kook-koo-ing of yours reminds me of something on which

we humans certainly need enlightenment. Tell me, is there any system, order, logic in your lives? To take your own case, you cuckoos are notorious for laying your eggs in the nests of other birds....".

He chuckled again, but almost resentfully. "You see," he said, interrupting me. "You see, you are given to judge things so much from your own human angle, that your verdict on us birds cannot but be what it is." He was speaking very slowly, calculating every word as though he were taking aim at something. "To start with, your premise of order is purely relative. Pray tell me, wise human, isn't your notion of order and goodness derived from all the chaos, violence, hatred, greed, selfishness and lust, which characterise all your thoughts, actions and words? How should I then convince you if I told you that our lives are fully ordered? You never would understand! If the cuckoo, for instance, appropriates somebody else's nest, as you just said: -in what way better are you? Don't tell me each one of you humans builds the house he stays in! And a pretty spot you would be in, if the masons, whom you pay a *panduddu** for their great labour, could but only resolve to build no other houses than their own!... But unlike you humans, each one of us is forever conscious of his own separate mission; and we cuckoos, particularly, have so little time on our hands, that it was decreed from the first that others should build our nests. But you'll not understand! Just now, for example, you rushed at me with a dirty mouthful, which got the better of all your

*Pie

vaunted reason, culture and civilisation. Why, man alive ! do you think I could be singing myself hoarse at this trying hour like an idiot who expends his energy in vain ? Do you imagine I sing in this solemn key, day after day, some three weeks now, for no rhyme or reason ? Oh, no—no, my friend ! As I've already told you, at this very hour the most destructive of your village bulletins are being issued. But out of your self-conceit, you will not heed me : one more sorry trait amongst you humans !”

He was, no doubt, righteously annoyed, but he soon sobered down.

”Look !” he said, stretching his neck glibly forward in the direction of the balcony in front of us. ”Now, you understand ?...”

I could not understand, and I acknowledged it with a sense of humiliation. For, as far as I could see, in that balcony there, were only our *regidor's* (patel's) son and his two daughters : Dinanath, the twenty-one-year-old law student, in an immaculate white dhooty, lying stretched on his back on a bench with an open book lifted over his face ; and Nalini and Jayashri seated on the floor, busy with any villager knows what.

But my feathered sage suddenly grew impatient. ”Come, come,” he said. ”There's no time to lose. Get stealthily behind that balcony chick. They are so engrossed, that they'll take no heed of you. I'll follow immediately and take my perch low down, on one of the eaves....”

We were soon at the appointed place.

Looking at the two girls, through an opening in the chick, I could not contain my rapture and exclaimed: "Cuckoo !..." But he instantly turned down on me. "S-sh, lower, will you ?" he said. "And none of your poetry, please !"

Nevertheless, I could not suppress my admiration. "Hey, cuckoo, how beautiful they are !" I whispered. "How beautiful our women are, if we Indians only knew it ! You know, cuckoo, the foreigner is lost in wonder at our girls not merely because of their beauty and rhythmic attire : but because, above all, they are what women should really be ! Our women, cuckoo, are womanly ! Thanks to God and our imperishable culture, our women are still the makers of our homes, still the mothers of *our* children, and the wives of their husbands !... To the outsider, our culture looks primitive and ridiculous. Yet, judging things from results, what greater culture is there in the world, cuckoo ?"

"Yes, yes !" he said, hastily. "All what you say is true, you wonderful Indian ! But it's not on a dissertation on Indian women that we've set out—have we ?"

I looked into his fiery eyes and saw him smiling. And suddenly I remembered that my friend was an Indian too.

But these bulletins, where on earth were they ? I looked on, but all I could see were two exquisite beings, with Dinanath pondering grimly over his book.

"How wonderful our women look in their long flowing hair!" I told my soul. The careful and painstaking effort made in plaiting the hair and then rolling it into a dainty knot on the nape of the neck, was never half so effective as when their raven, streaming tresses float and hang about their smooth, rounded shoulders in a graceful negligence. But this licence, like everything else, may only be suffered when strictly proper: only after bath, for instance; or when retiring to bed at night; or when, as now, they are engaged in the thrilling romance of ridding their wavy luxuriance of pests—forever bent upon tormenting them, God only knows why!

Jayashri, who had certainly not seen more than sixteen mango seasons, was seated on a *bankin* (a low wooden stool), the flowing folds of her brown, gold-bordered saree rolled up to her thighs and its upper end laid to rest in her lap. It was between her bare knees that her sister Nalini, a few years older, was safely ensconced, her lower limbs fully stretched out on the floor. Nalini was already married. In her flaming-red saree and the *cocoom* on her brow glowed the promise of eternal love and sacrifice.

There was hardly anything to choose between them two. They were both pretty and young and lively and gay. Both wore soft silken, sleeveless *chollis* (blouses) delightfully ambitious, with goodly curves as firm as virtue....

Cleaning each other's heads of lice is a regular afternoon occupation with our women. Jayashri ran

a two-sided, black comb through her sister's hair, released a louse from its teeth, deposited it on the spine of the comb and suddenly crushed it with her thumb-nail, crying : "Oosh !" in a strange tone of half relief and half vengeance.

Things went on in this manner for quite a while. Then, a different and, as I thought, much more thrilling device was employed. Jayashri now wedged the comb into her own hair, and proceeded to examine Nalini's head with her bare hands. Time and again, she would extricate a knit from a couple of strands with compressed thumb and finger nails : but on these occasions a sharp 'crack' accompanied the 'oosh !', producing a terribly uncanny effect.

It was in the process of this disturbing scene that I was suddenly reminded of my dark friend. "Hey," I said, looking up at him, "so far there's no bulletin that I can see—can you ?"

"Sssh !" he said. "These are just the preludes : we are drawing to it now !"

I watched and waited for the bulletin, when the expurgation suddenly developed into cold-blooded murder. The execrable knit and louse were being dealt their death penalty in their very nest. With this new strategy, Jayashri's delicate hands moved with a savage and lightning dexterity—and what jerks and dives did not Nalini's fair head go through !

However, these barbarous and enervating assaults soon came to a standstill. And Nalini, who was all

along looking dreamily and patiently into vacant space, at last broke the spell.

"Jaya !" she said. "Have you heard ?"

The cuckoo instantly croaked.

"What, Nalu ?" asked her sister, calmly, not at all ruffled by her womanly curiosity, and looking into the teeth of the comb.

"Dilip has been arrested. He was arrested this morning,"

"What !— our goldsmith ?" Jayashri's placid eyes dilated with horror and amazement.

"I knew the rascal would come to it," chuckled Dinanath, suddenly turning onto his side. "It serves him jolly well, too—the thief !"

"Why, Dinu, what could Dilip have done ?" asked Jayashri.

"What ! What else ? He must have been caught cheating, the rogue : inserting wax and clay into ornaments for weight !"

Jayashri rested her hands on her sister's shoulders. No more lice and knits for her now. "Is that so, Nalu ?" she said.

But Nalini seemed impassive, her eyes still penetrating the distance. "I don't know," she said. "There are all sorts of reports."

I heard a chuckle, and turning my gaze on my companion I noticed him shuffling with triumph. "You understand now, eh ?" he asked, highly amused.

"Some say, Dilip's robbed his cousin of three thousand."

"Huh ! whatfor ?" exclaimed Jayashri. "A village goldsmith, as everyone knows, is wealthy as he is !"

"Others, that Dilip's been having strange relations with Padma."

"Good God ! You mean the postman's wife ? Tchah ! what's the world coming to !"

"And poor Sita, what must her feelings be !" said Nalini, shivering. "But there's yet another report : Dilip was 'caught in the very act of poisoning Sita."

The law student rubbed his hands, confidently. "I, for one," he said, "feel Dilip has perpetrated all all these crimes. It's a case of simple gradation. Dilip begins by cheating his clients—see ? Then, he robs his *own* cousin of three thousand—see ? Going yet further he cheats another man of his wife—see ? Till, finally, he attempts to rob his *own* wife of her life. Ha, ha, ha !"

The youthful Jayashri looked with big wondering eyes at her brother. "Oh, how clever you are, Dinu !" she said. "But tell me, brother, what will become of him ?"

Dinanath suddenly grew very grave. "Fifteen years in Mozambique," he pronounced, as though he were the judge passing sentence. He then turned back to his book, and Jayashri, not knowing what to say, resumed cleaning her sister's head with unusual vengeance.

The cuckoo, who had been silent all along, now croaked in utter disgust. "Hey, that's the story of Dilip, the goldsmith," he said. "And it's on these very lines that all your newspapers and biographies are written. There's hardly any check on them, as a rule; but when there is, what startling revelations come not to light, my friend? You humans are *not* what you *are*: you are just what others report you to be—good or bad, clever or dull, kind or heartless!..."

His censure surprised me. "Why say this?" I asked him. "How do you know that this thing we've just heard is not true?"

"From experience," he rejoined, in a low, disquieting tone. "Observing you all for over eighty years, I have dicovered how slippery is human reputation!"

He then left me, as though he were sick of it all. Comfortably perched, once more, on the mango tree outside my house, he resumed his song. But, now, his staccato notes sounded weird and ominous, indeed.

"Hey cuckoo!" I said. "Can I bring you some chillies and rice?"

"The world's my granary," he said. "Why worry?"

I smiled. "And what do you propose doing now?"

"I? I don't know. We have no encumbrances and cares like you humans!"

I then left him and repaired to my balcony. Seated on one of its stone-chairs, I could not help

watching him ; he was singing like a poet under afflatus.

He kept on kook-koo-ing for some ten minutes. Then, suddenly, he grew restless, agitated. "Hey ! Hey !" he called out. "Hey, can you see ? There's the goldsmith himself : the man, who's supposed to be behind bars, romping God's good earth ! How lucky for you ! How lucky, indeed ! Come, come, let's edify ourselves with the better half of this human farce !"

We hurriedly got behind our *regidor's* chick again.

The bare-footed goldsmith was moving at a brisk pace, under a large umbrella whose black rain-cover was overlaid with a dirty white. He did not stop to pay his usual respects at the *regidor's*. But Dinanath somehow saw him. Dilip, Dilip, hey Dilip !" he shouted.

Startled by their brother's cry, the two girls sprang to their feet with amazing elasticity. "Dilip ? Who, Dilip ?" they muttered, incredulously.

"Dilip soon made his appearance, smiling obsequiously.

"In a devilish hurry you are, sir," said the law student, with a policeman's swagger. "What good can an umbrella do you, h'm ?— when the big wide world's a fraction too small for your pussy face ?... Where are you going ?"

"To Dr. Salustinho's, *senhor*," said Dilip, in a calm and steady voice. He had been accustomed to

accept hurtful humour as the prerogative of the rich and powerful.

Dinanath laughed wildly. "Is Dr. Salustinho's—the advocate's? Whatfor, you fool? I tell you, it's a hopeless case!"

And the innocent Jayashri who was scanning the goldsmith with pitying eyes, suddenly burst out: Oh, Dilip!..."

"Tchah! I could never believe it of you!" sneered Nalini.

The man was indeed perplexed; he showed it in his whole demeanour.

"I was going to Dr. Salustinho's to..." he commenced to explain, when the law student cut him short: "We know! We know everything! You needn't tell us, you despicable man!"

The goldsmith's pride was suddenly piqued. "I don't understand you *senhor*!" he said.

"No! Oh no! Yet, you understand cheating alright; robbery, adultery and murder, alright—and the whole string of all the possible and impossible crimes in the world, you scoundrel!"

And Dilip all at once laughed loud and long. "Ho, ho, ho! I understand you now!" he said. "I've understood everything.... But, *senhor*, why address Dilip, *the goldsmith*, in the matter, when it's really Dilip, *the shop-keeper*?"

"What!" cried the trio, staring inanely at each other.

"And coming to it," continued the goldsmith, looking terribly dignified and righteous, "it isn't Dilip, the shop-keeper, either! Question should be made of Shankar, the shop-keeper's cousin, who's robbed Dilip of a large sum of money; of Sita, Dilip's wife, who instigated Shankar to do it, and even tried to poison Dilip; and, finally, of Lohan, the post-man, who treated the sluttish Sita as though she were his own Padma! But the three are the Republic's guests at the moment and your enquiry may have to be deferred for a small period of some fifteen to twenty years!"

The young women opened wide their sweet little mouths and displayed their beautiful white teeth; while the prospective wizard of the law hung his head low, like a sorry sage whose philosophy has only brought grief and chaos into world

"What a tragedy!" remarked the cuckoo "Were I to take you round all the balconies, you would indeed appreciate why I keep kook-koo-ing at this sweltering hour.... But tell me, you, what chances does your good name stand when it can be pulled to pieces in this frivolous manner? It's the same with your newspapers, biographies and histories too—and everything else you report about men and affairs. Were it out of ignorance merely, you might have been forgiven. But, oftener than not, it's out of ingrained pride, selfishness and malice!..."

I only nodded, weighed down with a sense of frustration.

"But tell me, cuckoo," I said, some moments later. "Now that you talk of history: what's the version of you birds of the Indian Mutiny and the Black Hole of Calcutta? What think you is Goa's destiny? And what have you to say, pray, about India sliced into freedom with a deluge of fraternal blood?..."

He was on the point of answering these questions. But an angry kite just then swooped down upon him, and my friend nervously fled away, looking as guilty as a traitor....

No doubt, he still keeps on singing from the same old mango tree, but he is now like every other bird I see. he will not speak to me again. That he should have spoken even once, I suppose, was a privilege more than allowed us humans!

THE PRINCESS

Many a story my father told me, but there is one that stands out of that galaxy, like the moon, and forever haunts me with its elusive truth and beauty.

How strange indeed that, of all those stories, I cannot recollect even one which is not in the nature of a fairy tale ! When I was a child of six, they had struck off on that time-immemorial, intriguing note : "Once upon a time, there lived..." ; and when I was eighteen, almost a man, they still jealously clung to that same old, ever-fresh and fascinating introduction. Yet, with this shrewd and subtle difference : though every tale was addressed to the credulity of a child, its calibre altered and adjusted itself to the growing intellect of its hearer.

Could it be that my father realised that his son would always remain a child ? It must have been so, I keep on telling myself. I have a large eye of wonder for the world. My faith, too, has in no way tainted or dimmed : it drinks freely of the fountains of hope. And to me the impossible still seems possible, as it once did when the tiny heroes in my stories killed the wicked giants as large as the oak in stature. As always, there is no failure which will not eventually blossom into success ; no weakness or failing which will not grow into a tower of strength ; no tears of grief and suffering which

will not, some day, convert into tears of gladness and rejoicing !

But what is this story—the last story, in fact, that he told me in his career as a story-teller, before God suddenly cried stop to my father's own life-story ?

Once upon a time, there lived a king and queen, my son, a wise and holy king and queen who superintended the whole earth.

There were no wars in those days ; nor did any one ever conceive the things we call *territorial rights, economic influence, colonial empire*.

The people were joined in one universal brotherhood and citizenship, with common interests and a common goal ; a people who looked upon selfishness and greed, lack of mutual sympathy and love, as hideous and unnatural.

Ignorance and illiteracy were unheard of. There was no want nor waste : no millionaires and senseless luxury on the one hand, and drudgery and starvation on the other. Every man had a home, a strip of land. And all the amenities of life, so very indispensable to happiness and virtue, were his.

And though the same physical laws operated then as now, sickness and disease were hardly known. The human mind was healthy, and the conditions of life were congenial and orderly. What is more, the health of the people was one of the chief cares of the state. Just imagine it, my son, countless scientists and doctors exhausting their whole lives in laboratories fully engrossed in this side of the human question !

It would have been fantastic and hideous for even a single scientist to devote his God-given genius to bombs and arms and ammunition for the purpose of committing desecration on his very brethren !

The priests chanted their hymns of thanksgiving to the Lord ; the philosophers and psychologists put their minds into one united whole to evolve a life of happiness for their people ; the musicians touched the soul as though God's voice quivered in their harps ; and the poets, sculptors, painters and writers depicted in their own wonderful manner and way the miracle in nature and man.

But with all this desirableness, the earth was the earth after all. It had one failing : a major failing ! The men of those days lacked insight into one of the greatest truths, the truth about *woman*. Very much like in our own times, woman to the men of that bygone age was something essentially physical, a thing whose preciousness depended only on external beauty, grace and enchantment. And so, with the exception of a few beautiful and ravishing women of the time on whom all hearts and minds were madly set, all other women—and they were countless—came to be regarded as commonplace, uninteresting and negligible. With the tragic result, that mothers and wives were denied the niches allotted them in the felicitous plan of creation. The philosophers, on their part, had of course worked indefatigably year after year, hour upon hour, to correct this sad failing, but it was to no avail. All their exposition, reasoning and rhetoric failed to illumine the darkness in which their brethren miserably groped.

And as if this failing, which cast its bleak shadow athwart the earth, were not enough, there was a sorrow besides: a sorrow felt acutely by every citizen as though it were his very own. In spite of fifteen long years of love and endearment, the good and holy king and queen were childless!

Ever since the disconsoling sign of a hope that looked remote and unrealisable was first detected, the earth had lifted up one concerted voice of supplication to God. And this voice, I might tell you my son, had not diminished in fervour or entreaty for wellnigh eleven years. In fact, the more that eagerly-awaited joy receded into the distance, the more this voice had gained in volume and vigour, so that the Lord who denies men nothing if they but only ask it, blessed the earth at last with a princess more beautiful than man's proudest notions of beauty.

And the princess grew in age and wisdom. At sixteen, they say, she was an ecstasy, a heavenly delight! Men considered themselves happy in dwelling on her sight alone, caring for naught else in the big wide world. But it was for her beauty, her beauty alone, that they did desire her.

Fortunately, not everybody regarded her in this deplorable way. There were a few—the philosophers, I mean—who proclaimed that there was nothing strange in the princess, as a woman, except her unearthly beauty. Often, they would nod their grave heads in chorus and exclaim: "Doubtless, she's been given to us for some inscrutable purpose!"

And so with the passage of the years, when the princess was eighteen, the king and queen, seeing the exquisite woman she had grown, decided to give her in marriage. As they were of the people, a consort had to be chosen from the people.

Incredible as it might seem, my son, ever since the princess was eight, ever since her beauty was recognised and bruited all over the earth, the number of unmarried men had rapidly increased : so much so that now it exceeded all computation !

With the decision of the king and queen, the following proclamation was broadcast across the breadth and length of the earth, through pigeon-carriers who served the telegraphy of those days :

“Be it known to all our fellow citizens that we are advised to give the princess, our daughter, in marriage from the 350th day from the day hereof.

“Every brother citizen, therefore, who aspires to the hand of our beloved daughter, must report at our palace on the 248th day from the day hereof : exactly when the auspicious sun has lifted his head over the peepul-tree which stands in front of our ancient temple. In the cherished traditions of our freedom-loving land, the choice of a husband will be left wholly and entirely to the princess herself.”

And wasn't there a stampede, my son ! A feverishness raged, like unto that of men whose souls

are set on wealth, or whose souls are distraught with the obsession of power and glory.

Thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions, straightaway made hectic preparations for the journey. And those who were far away, who feared that they would not reach the palace in the appointed time, hit upon a device remarkable in the extreme. They set out on the backs of birds—now extinct—large as ostriches in size, which were capable of darting through space much upon thirty miles an hour. Yes, it was a contrivance born of sheer necessity, for there were no motor-cars nor railways, no steamships nor aeroplanes in those days.

But of all that surging multitude in and around the palace, one solitary young man alone there was who aspired not to the hand of the princess.

While the rest were encamped in the royal precincts days and weeks in advance, this young man, with his shocking indifference and cynicism, had elected to appear in the very nick of time. He had, nevertheless, traversed some thirty-four leagues, devoting every wakeful moment to the enjoyment of creation: hill and dale, meadow and forest, flower and fountain, and all the other countless flourishes of God's superb art. No wonder, he arrived on the palace-grounds unseemly and unkempt.

Ever since he had espied, from the distance, that gaudy concourse, his nether lip had curled in bitter contempt. And when he had, at last, come upon the fringe of that immense ring he was heard to mutter: "Fools! you've eyes and see not! The

princess, what has she? Beauty? Then sure you'll fling her to the dogs the moment she loses that fleeting attribute!.." And having thus mouthed his disgust, he had elbowed his way nonchalantly through the heaving crowd, and forced a place in the foremost file facing the palace doors, his restless, ferret eye taking in the most inconspicuous of details.

It was just then that the sun lifted its big bright face above the peepul-tree. The palace gongs raised a thunderous din. Then followed a sigh, a many-mouthed single sigh, like unto that of a frenzied ocean hurtling upon the sands. The fateful moment had at long last arrived!

The princess now embarked on the selection of her man. How any choice, son, could be made in this hap-hazard and lightning manner, I have never been able to understand. There was no other recourse, I suppose. Only imagine the princess choosing to study each man, say even as many as a hundred daily: growing older and older with the days and years; then old, very old, old as old can be, and yet not finishing with a fragment of that seething multitude!

Gliding through the huge brazen portals, with flushed cheeks and a nervous step, she soon took her stand on a specially erected dais high up in the palace porch. It was the men in front of the palace she was facing. And what a greeting they accorded her! "Three cheers to the princess!" "Long live the beautiful princess!" "God bless our princess!" "How beautiful you are!" "Oh, how beautiful she

is!" It was a stormy chaos of vehement voices let loose in a whirlpool of competition, the soft gentle ones deadened and drowned by the loud and heavy, and they in turn by the thickest and shrillest! And she bowed to them, bowed and bowed, this way and that, till that deafening madness scaled down to a civil whisper and finally an uncanny silence.

She looked uncertainly around for a moment, then suddenly reminded of her purpose she ran her eye, with what seemed like huge binoculars, through that motley crowd assembled in the palace front. And instantly every man posed to her as though she were a camera: smiling and lively, looking at his best and finest. But dressed as they all were in a bright and costly sameness, with the expression on their faces lending them a strange uniformity of look and appearance, the beautiful girl, from the very outset, was somehow attracted by the young man with his sulky hauteur. When her searching glance had, therefore, swept from flank to flank, and then pierced into the depths of that dense mass, it had been fain to revert and settle on him again. And from the manner she now looked at him, there was no doubt that her mind was already made.

But the proceedings could not be left off just there. It would have been an insult to those gathered on the other three sides of the palace and those within. Two hours were taken up by this perfunctory duty, but when she finally emerged from the palace once more the crowd saw her, with disgust and horror, approach that same unkempt, disrespectful young man.

"Citizen !" she said to him, tenderly. "Who may you be ?"

The man was utterly confused. He bowed to her distractedly. "I am...a philosopher, princess," he stammered.

She smiled strangely, as though she had known it all along. Then, in blushing hesitation, her voice irresistably sweet, she said : "Philosopher, I'm your's !"

He looked inanely at her. "Pardon me ! Pardon me, princess," he stuttered, "but that can never be !"

A gloom swiftly spread over the princess's radiant face. And the fountains of her sorrow and disappointment suddenly burst. Ashamed and aggrieved she hurriedly fled to her chamber, her bewildered parents following in her wake.

Then came on a salvo of infuriated shouts, an impatient thudding of feet, and hisses which whistled like the gale. "Fool !" "Fool !" "What a fool !"

The man was extremely discomfited. But how was he to blame ? How could he ever marry the princess ?

Thinking it over, he suddenly rushed to the palace doors and sought an interview with the king. The royal guard eyed him at first with deliberate anger and scorn ; then hoping that a change had perhaps come over him they led him to the princess's chamber, where the confounded parents were piteously struggling to console their inconsolable daughter.

"Brother citizen!" pleaded the philosopher, taking the king by the hand. "Pray, take not it amiss. Only a mad man would reject the choice which has fallen on him out of eager millions! But, good citizen, I have a mission to fulfil: I'm pledged to God! Not until *man*, every man, has rated the pricelessness of *woman* may I be released from my pledge. Brother, I should otherwise have been the first to take your daughter's hand!"

It was a desperate cause, indeed. And, in their helplessness, the king and queen quickly bowed to the ground and invoked the aid of the Almighty. A lightning instantly answered their prayer. And in less than the fraction of a second God's own messenger stood before them, making the air his pedestal.

Unearthly in beauty and fascination he was. His *dhooty* and *kurta* (shirt) emitted rays like a cluster of diamonds. His eye was calm and placid, like a translucent pond; yet it dazzled like the sun, so that the prostrate king and queen, the princess and philosopher, had swiftly to shield their eyes with their hands.

"May the Lord forever be praised!" he said. "Inscrutable are His ways, and of His bounty there is no end!"

He then paused and smiled. "It was the rare and remarkable magnanimity of your people, oh king and queen," he said, "which gave you your princess. And it is through this self-same princess that your people are to be recompensed. Wherefor, be it known unto you: the beauty of your daughter is only an

outward sign of an inward grace instilled into the soul of every woman ever created."

He paused again and reflected. "I assure you," he said, "God could not have stepped farther in His wisdom and goodness in His creation of this partner and mate for His creature—man. This better-half of his, without whom his individuality, happiness and destiny would forever remain incomplete and insignificant.... Woman's kindness and tenderness; her ready sympathy and deep understanding; her ever-constant sense of the preservation of humanity from degradation and ruin; her unlimited capacity for love and sacrifice, both as mother and wife, helpmate and companion: all these gifts, unique among the gifts of creation, were purposely dowered on her, so that man may be happy in her, and through her divinely-appointed influence on him he may be restrained from eschewing his destiny."

And here he suddenly grew irate and almost scowled. "Yet man has reached that tragic and pitiful state," he said, "where he considers *her* valueless and negligible. Woman, to man to-day, is purely physical and gross!... Nevertheless, the gracious Father, greatly touched by the maganimity of your people, destined when He gave you your princess to restore in time to all men that lost wisdom and insight into the intrinsic value of woman."

"Here," he then said, drawing from his bosom a tiny tube in which the tiniest tongue of a flame sought eager escape in all directions. "Here's a flash from the fountainhead of all Wisdom! Release it

into a cistern and give all men to drink a little of the water thereof. But take good note, however : no sooner this flame has imparted its virtue to the water and once again rejoined its source, the beauty of the princess will suffer a lightning change, and she shall be like unto all other women !”

“Do this,” he said, “and may the happiness which the Almighty has been pleased to restore to you, remain with you forever !” Saying which he suddenly melted away, and with his disappearance all around shivered and freezed for a moment.

His behest was hastily carried out, and the water of wisdom given to all the multitudes who sought the princess’s hand. Only the philosopher refused to drink of the water. And when the princess had lost her unearthly beauty, as foretold, he seemed not the least discomforted or disturbed. “Woman !” said he to her, embracing her, “rarest of God’s prodigies, now that I’m released from my pledge you shall be mine forever !”

But all those who had tasted of that water still gazed at the princess with the same old eye of wonderment. Advised of the philosopher’s decision, bitterly disappointed, they left for home in various directions. But what was their surprise and amazement, my son, when they discovered on the way that every woman they met was as beautiful and as enchanting as the princess !

The married men, both young and old, it is reported, witnessing the incredible change in the bachelors, rushed frantically from all over the earth

to the royal palace and drank of that water too, even bringing some of it home for their children and grandchildren.

And happiness on earth, then, was such as the world has never known. With the true perspective of woman, with her being restored to her rightful honour and position, they say there never were greater mothers or wives. And if there never were greater mothers or wives, there never were, too, greater fathers, greater husbands, greater sons and daughters.

But, alas ! this happiness lasted for only 518 years. The generations, who did not taste of that water, reverted to the despicable old way again !...

This story, I might as well tell you my son, was related to me by the Dalai-Lama, on my visit to Tibet years ago, when I was mystically inclined and almost became a Lama myself. He said that it is recorded in a book jealously guarded by the hillmen. The inscription is on parchment, and the tome itself 5953 years old !

WILD WINDS

by

LOUIS GRACIAS

(a book of short stories, published in December, 1939)

George Santayana, M.D., Ph.D., Litt. D. (Venice, March 21, 1940) : I sometimes receive privately printed little books from India, of a religious sentimental nature, reflecting the native pantheisms perhaps in a Europeanized form ; what interests me in your "Wild Winds" is that here the same moral simplicity appears with Christian names, Spanish or Portuguese. Yet there is nothing specifically Catholic in what you write. And why do you write in English ? I should think such tales for simple souls about simple souls would be more touching in some native language, where the words and the sentiments went together.... However, I am too far removed from the scene, and too old, to judge what is appropriate for your circumstances.

Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, M. A., Ph.D. (Calcutta, 26.1.40) : I found the writing thoughtful and stimulating.

Srimati Sarojini Naidu (Hyderabad, Deccan, 6.1.40) : I am sorry I could not write earlier to acknowledge your kind gift of "Wild Winds". Only to-day I could find a free moment to read the attractive little stories which you have written with so much skill and sincerity. I like **Revolt** best, I think. It is poignant and moving. I send my best wishes for your literary success.

Monsignor Ronald Knox (Aldenham Park, Bridgnorth, April 15, 1940) : Thank you very much for your kindness in sending me a copy of "Wild Winds". I don't set up to be a literary critic, so you will excuse me if I don't write the sort of appreciation which publishers want. But I am sure that the real purpose of literature is for a man to put his mind on paper, and the real business of the reader is, not to criticize,

but to dip into the other man's mind and see with his eyes for a little. And I am grateful to you for the experience.

Amarnath Jha, M.A., F.R.S.L., Hon. D.Litt., Vice-Chancellor, Allahabad University (Senate House, Allahabad, December 22, 1939) : I have been on a tour and so have delayed acknowledging the kind gift of "Wild Winds". I have read the stories with much pleasure, especially the one entitled "Yellow Dust"... What has specially impressed me in your book is your wise avoidance at all effort at padding or decoration. I hope you will continue to write.

Srinivasa Iyengar, M.A. D.Litt., Professor of English, Lingaraj College, Belgaum (Belgaum, 28.12.1939) : Many thanks for your complimentary copy of "Wild Winds". I have now read the stories contained in that volume and it has given me great pleasure to notice how well you have conceived your situations and described them.

The Modern Review (January, 1942) : "This little book, the first from the pen of the author, contains a few short stories, some of which are really delightful...the author will no doubt be able to contribute something lasting to literature." (Jogesh Chandra Bhattacharyya)

The Hindu (Sunday, February 25, 1940) : "There are in this little book seven short stories which are full of profound tenderness and a high moral intention, with none of the irresponsibility suggested by the title. Indeed the author's Christian faith and conservative temper function as plastic forces which give to his conceptions a certain solidity and firmness which they would otherwise lack. .." (K. Srinivasan)

New Review (February, 1940) : "...seven well-knit stories, all short, all delightful, and all with a moral that does not irritate the reader. A dreamy suggestiveness frequently invades the narrative (noticeably in the symbolic tale of "The Yellow Dust") and makes it meaningful and fanciful..." (H. P. Chattopadhyaya).

The Calcutta Review (Calcutta University, October, 1940) : The execution is generally graceful, and the medium simple, the effect pleasant..." (P. R. SEN).

The Hindustan Review—Editor Dr. Sachchidananda Sinha, Barrister-at-Law, Vice-Chancellor, Patna University (August, 1940): *Wild Winds* is a collection of short stories. But it will not be appropriate to call them 'short stories', they are rather pretty little poems in prose. Each is concerned with a mood, an idea, an emotion, and the author has portrayed them in a language which may be regarded as a model of suavity and simplicity. Here and there the writer has struck a deep note which is highly refreshing. For example :—"She was seated on the bank of the forest lake, this beautiful—ineffably beautiful—maiden. Unaware of my presence, she continued to cheer the dull waters with her soft ruddy feet to the accompaniment of a happy love-song." There is no attempt at the creation of a plot, or the development of character, nor is there any subtle psychological analysis. But the heart of a mother (as in *Revolt*, or *Her son*) and the heart of a maiden (as in *Adeline* or *Isabel*) are very subtly probed, and just one twinge, or one longing, has been brought out with great force and beauty.... We have nothing but appreciation for these excellent stories."

Mahatma Gandhi (V. Kalyanam, Birla House, New Delhi, 24.12.47) : Gandhiji is in receipt of your letter of 17th instant as also the copy of your book entitled "Wild Winds." While thanking you for having sent him a copy of your book, Gandhiji regrets that as he is much too preoccupied in solving the communal tangle in the country to-day and bringing peace to the distressed India, he will not be able to spare any time to go through your book and pass any opinion on it.

Rabindranath Tagore (Uttarayan, Santiniketan, 27.12.39) : I thank you for your kindness in sending me your book "Wild Winds."

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (Tarlok Singh, New Delhi, 5.6.47) : I am desired by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru to thank you for your book "Wild Winds" which you have so kindly presented him. It is regretted that this could not be acknowledged earlier.